# Black Mirror

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/2456099.

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|---|---|
| Rating: | Explicit |
| Archive Warnings: | Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con |
| Category: | M/M |
| Fandoms: | Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types |
| Relationships: | Matthew Brown/Will Graham, Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Matthew Brown/Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter |
| Characters: | Will Graham, Matthew Brown (Hannibal), Hannibal Lecter, Mason Verger, Margot Verger, Freddie Lounds, Kade Purnell |
| Additional Tags: | Manipulation, Angst, Murder, Non-Consensual Drug Use, terrible things happening to Will Graham, terrible things happening because of Will Graham, emotional cruelty, Gunplay, Body Horror, Post-Episode: s02e13 Mizumono, Mason's henchpeople, Mutilation, Hurt/Comfort, the comfort is not wholly adequate, Recovery, and things that need recovering from, This entire plot is an elaborate construct built to accommodate horrible horrible filth, Bloodplay, Knifeplay, Psychological Manipulation, Near Death Experiences, pornado, Scars, skimming around themes of consent, Tread Carefully, Poor Will, poor all of them, Bondage, nearly forgot the bondage, Wound Fucking, Sub Will, Dubious Consent, Really dubious consent, non-con elements, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, Physical Abuse |
| Language: | English |
| Series: | Part 1 of Oil and Mirrors |
| Stats: | Published: 2014-10-14 Completed: 2015-02-15 Words: 70,670 Chapters: 22/22 |

# Black Mirror

by Nerve_Itch


Summary

Recovery isn't easy when every new circumstance seems to call for fresh blood. Everyone knows that Will is trying to throw himself into Hannibal's path, but there's some confusion as to *why*.

There are too many people offering guidance and too few of them are kind. It might be easy to attribute the mounting body count to the cause of catching the ripper, but then there's Hannibal, curating from the sidelines, trying to help Will understand why really, *he's* the one who wants to get caught.

[Or, a blood-filled romp through a European city, culminating in the uncomfortable psychoanalysis of Will's boner.]


Notes

See the end of the work for notes

# Recover

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They tell him he'll be able to leave, soon. It's just, they warn, that there are complications. That the wound…it had been *dirty*.

As Will manoeuvres his way around the remaining tubes and pouches, carries them with him to the bathroom across the corridor, he consider the word and how it seems insubstantial, and yet it still clings to the recurring loops of his memories.

If he could only see the experience as something dirty, murky, indistinguishable from rationality or justification – just some experience mired in filth and things unknown – it might make it easier for him. He nudges the bathroom door shut behind him and braces for the ragged tug in his gut from the exertion of pissing.

The problem, he knows, is clarity,

There's no film of filth that allows him protection from the knowledge that Abigail's death, her real one, is on him.

He shakes himself off, not as thoroughly as he'd like, but as much as his balance between pride and pain will allow. There's the dirt that clings to a memory and obscures it, and then there's the kind of knowledge that *festers*.

If he could only blame Hannibal, this might be easy.

He waits for the sound of staff shouting about cannulas and pans to sidle into the distance before he nudges the door back open. It's not that he's avoiding the nurses; it's more that there's an inherent kindness in their actions that only piles onto his guilt and he'd rather not be confronted by it in their encouraging glances. It's that when they warn him that he'll need to take care of himself when he's out, he doesn't believe that, at this point, he has any *right* to self-preservation.

He shuffles towards his curtained bed, already adapting his movements to accommodate the restrictions imposed on him by his injury and already accepting the inevitability of a pain that might not always be sharp, but at least will be constant.

"You're looking better."

He jolts at the accusatory voice, his reactionary breath too sharp to avoid a wheedle of nerves shuddering up through his ribs.

Kade Prurnell is sat to the side of his bed, posture firm and face holding in more emotions than she'd permit herself to release. She's wearing a shade of mauve that's too close to the

colour of the envelope in his bedside cupboard for the decision not to seem deliberate, even if she couldn't know about that.

"I'm making progress" he tells her flatly, practicing the action of sitting down without wincing.

"Good."

The way she says it, firm and impassive, it could mean anything from concern to relief that he's nearing the kind of physical wellness that the FBI can go back to making use of. He suspects the latter.

"I'm told you'll be needing to avoid strenuous activity, and stress."

She states it factually, though there's a challenge in the last word that reassures Will of his justified pessimism.

"Apparently my immune system now makes me *vulnerable*" he says, swinging his legs up onto the bed and leaning back against the plastic headboard. Kade may be the embodiment of the counter-productive bureaucracy the FBI is hinged on, but that doesn't mean he has to make her feel any less aware of the absence of humanity in it. It's not that he thinks he deserves consideration; it's more that he doesn't think she should be absolved of the fallout from her actions, either.

"It is unfortunate," she smiles, curt, "that certain establishments cannot guarantee an environment that is conducive to a full recovery."

"What sort of environment are you referring to?" asks Will, attributing the rapid drying of his throat to the morning's dose of Vicodin and steroids.

"For all Baltimore likes to call itself a hospital, I am not confident that a patient has the best path to recovery inside its walls" she states.

Will finds a moment between the rising sickness and minute tremble of instinctual horror in which to consider how he respects Kade for, if nothing else, having the audacity to outline her attempts at manipulation so clearly.

It's almost refreshing.

"Am I to assume that you're here to provide an alternative for such an unhealthy outcome for me, or are you simply informing me of the inevitable?"

"It's as though you understand" she tells him, and there seems to be a smile tensing one side of her mouth. It's soon eclipsed by the stone of her pink rimmed eyes and the hardness of her words. "If there existed some proof that the actions of yourself, and of Jack Crawford, were somehow the result of potent interference from Tattle Crime's current preoccupation…"

Will clenches his jaw at the reference to Freddie's extensive influence.

"…then there *is* a chance you may be spared further indignity."

Will flushes warm at the extended allusion to Freddie and her most recent photography spree in the hospital. He'd resent her more if she wasn't currently the sole reason that his dogs had been spared kennels, or worse, though he finds that loathing and dependency are not always mutually exclusive.

"You have any leads yet?"

He doesn't point out that she hasn't spoken the name of the cannibal, and that she is somehow adding to the invocation of Hannibal as monster by treating his name as something fearful.

Kade 's mouth thins into a line before she answers.

"He sent a package to Quantico."

Before Will can let his mind supply the images of potential fragments of anatomy that may have been carried across oceans to confuse the minds at Behavioural Science, Kade elaborates.

"…Of aftershave. Price has run analytics on it but nothing beyond "probably French" has come up yet. Any idea why he'd send it?"

Will's neck feels taut and swallowing seems harder again, somehow.

"Addressed to…?" he asks.

"Our address. No name."

Will knows – *knows* – that it was intended for him. That Hannibal's baiting is a message, and that by sending it to Quantico, he's telling Will that he knows he's still on the side that's opposed to him. And in the same gesture, he's giving him an escape from…he wants to say Baltimore, but he means from purgatory. From mundanity. From denial. And he's broadcasting his intention to anyone in Behavioural Science who may be smart enough – or embroiled enough – to understand. Subtlety was never part of Hannibal's design.

All this sea and land between them and they're still in each other's heads.

"And nothing's come for you here, at the hospital?"

Will denies knowledge of his hidden mauve envelope and its simple invitation. He doesn't trust Kade to understand, or maybe he expects that she might, and that scares him all the more.

"Freddie left me those the last time she was here" he says dryly, gesturing to the wilting white spray of flowers to his left.

"You'll have limited resource. I don't want us involved if we can avoid it. You have passage for travel, but overseas firearms are beyond the permissions we can risk, officially."

Will is momentarily stunned by the brash departure from protocol, though he recognises in Kade a kind of determination that he suspects runs in more common a vein than he'd like to acknowledge.

"You really think I can catch him?" he asks.

"Not alone, no. And there is no one we can provide to assist. But Jack hasn't woken yet and we're short on options. If you have any allies, Mr Graham, I suspect you contact them as soon as you are able."

Will blinks his acquiescence and watches her depart. He waits for silence before he pulls the envelope out of its hiding place and stares at the words as though they'll somehow speed up the recovery.

*When you are ready for forgiveness, I will be waiting.*

–

It's two days later when Freddie breezes into his ward – considerately having chosen visiting hours, when their conversation will be punctuated by the tending and fussing of hospital staff and thus forfeiting any attempt at privacy. Will is almost relieved for the company. He's learnt not to confuse this with trust.

"You have mail" she announces, throwing a black envelope at his bed. There's white animal hair on her grey tweed skirt suit and as she perches on the foot of his bed, he wants to beckon her closer so that he can pull the tiny strands off her, keep them as a reminder that something of a life before Hannibal might yet be waiting for him when he gets out. He remains silent.

"Please, open it" she asks. "I've been dying to know who's courting your affections this time."

Freddie matches Will's involuntary sneer with a bright smile.

"Tell me why you're here."

"Tell me who that's from. It's not…smart enough to be from him, is it?"

Will thumbs at the envelope. It's sealed with glue, not spit. It's inelegant.

"How are the dogs?" he asks.

"They smell. It's unsavoury" smiles Freddie, and her look of distaste is in contrast to the evidence of her repeated proximity to them.

"Not like you to shy away from unsavoury things, Freddie."

A printed page on headed paper slides out of the envelope into Will's lap. He recognises the top of the image as being one of the photos Freddie had taken from the hospital in his first few days of being admitted, with text from the article cropped around the side. Ugly red handwriting spells out the message "It's good for starters", and a stamp of the Verger crest sits beneath it.

Will finds himself missing Hannibal's more artful messages, then finds himself suppressing the small revulsion that this acknowledgement brings.

"It's Mason" he tells her.

"Mmm."

"But you knew that already, so, why are you here?"

He should ask her *how* she knew – though there's a limit to how much rope he wants to give her.

"Mason's need for revenge isn't as focused on you as he's making it look. He's out for richer blood than yours."

"Poetic, Freddie."

She smiles, then elaborates.

"You're going to go after him when you're out, aren't you? Tracking the continent for your former partner in crime – literal partner?"

"Stop writing your copy while you're with me. It's vulgar and coarse and…it may suit you but it's making my headache worse."

"I'm only reminding you that you won't be hunting alone, and the rest of the pack might have different intentions."

Will says nothing, knows that she knows about the mauve envelope and has more fully formed suspicions than most about the conflicted moralities spurring Will into action.

"And much as I'm not averse to your downfall, I'd be a lot happier if you were able to bring his about first. You'll need help."

"And you're offering?"

"Not exactly, but I do have certain skills" she smiles. "And it's safe to assume he's keeping tabs on you through me already."

"What's your price this time?"

"I get to keep your dogs."

Will coughs in surprise and then swallows the sharp pain that reverberates through him at the action.

“I’m kidding. There’s hair everywhere.”

“I imagine they shed less than you.”

“I’m serious. For once it seems as though we’re aligned in our desire” she says, and something about the word ‘desire’ coming from her mouth makes Will feel desperately uncomfortable. “So, I’ll do what I know best, and you do what you know best.”

The thanks that Will offers sound far from sincere.

“Verger believes you’re the one to coax him out of hiding, but he’ll never admit it. But, he needs you.”

“Nice of him to show it with his customary charm,”

“Hmm. More pressingly, it seems that your former admirer is up for appeal. With the right attention, he could probably be released” she adds as she steps away from the bed. “He could be a real asset to the hunt. What with you being all…” She completes her sentence with a smile that might look sympathetic on another face.

It takes Will a moment to register who is being referred to and the memory returns a reminder of something like failure, something like disappointment.

“Matthew?”

“First name terms. I like that. Makes for better copy.”

Will wishes in that moment that his glare contained knives. He settles for silence and watches the squirrelish movements of Freddie disappearing out of the ward.

Chapter End Notes

Updates will happen every few days. Comments and kudos are better than tramadol...

http://muffichka.tumblr.com/

# Set up

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first night that Will spends in his own bed, surrounded by dogs and silence and a thin sheen of painkillers, it's a long one. His sheets are cooler than the ones in the hospital and it's easier to fall into sleep without the constant threat of interruption from healthcare staff. It's the weight of the sheets he notices first; comforting, like a hug. Like the way he used to fall asleep, content in loneliness with the imagined intimacy offered by nothing more difficult to handle than blankets.

The embrace tightens and he's loosely aware that he's not asleep, not quite.

"I forgive you" he hears in a voice thick with blood.

Will tries to answer. Knows that it's Hannibal and that there are more amends to make between them than he'll ever have opportunity for. Tries to call out that he thinks he understands, now. Hopes that if he can say it loudly enough, that he'll somehow reverse time. He feels the urgency of his need to convince the voice, as though if he can only say it, Abigail will be alive again and maybe, so will he.

"I'm…"

The word slides through his oesophagus, stops in his throat. There's pain – more pain – piercing his chest. It's when he looks to his side to reach for painkillers that he catches the black animal eyes above him. As the image of the stag solidifies, hot breath and feathers and fur – the pain in his chest intensifies, spiders out to his stomach and he can see – can *feel* – the antlers goring him, piercing through to something solid beneath him.

He panics – panting, wet breaths that don't quite make it into his lungs – and grips the warm bone of the antlers, trying to push them out and catching his hands on new prongs as they push into him. The ground beneath him folds like sifted soil. It rises around him, holds him under as the stag pushes further and all of him is filling with dirt.

"You put yourself here" he hears from a voice distant, above the earth he's buried in.

He becomes aware that the stag is no longer visible, replaced by a veil of earth that's growing in weight, but he's still skewered by the antlers. Still choking.

"You know the way out."

The voice is barely audible but still carries that mellifluous authority that belongs only to Hannibal.

Will wants to stop. Wants to swallow the earth and let it catch in his throat and stop his breathing, stop his thinking and let the weight fall and crush him. Let his wounds bleed into

the ground until he's one with the dirt and doesn't have to fight.

"I can pull you out but only if…"

The rest of the words aren't there but Will knows what they're supposed to be. That he can be free of the weight if he can only forgive. That simply *understanding* isn't enough. He has to accept Hannibal's forgiveness, and match it with his own.

Soil clogs his nostrils and his chest and stomach feels raw and he doesn't *remember* struggling, but his body is trying to force its way upwards. Out of the ground and through the prongs in his chest.

"Will."

He's reaching now – pushing upwards, hands clawing through clumps of mud and he still can't *breathe* and why can't he just *sink* instead…

Strong hands have his wrists with an offer to pull or to snap them entirely. There's light in front of his eyes and he's spitting earth and choking.

"Are you ready, Will?"

More mud spat from his mouth.

"I didn't fight you, that night" Will offers. As though this was proof of his alignment.

Hannibal nods and pulls him closer, pushing the antlers through until they're protruding fully from his back. He looks satisfied and as Will moves to pull them out, he grips his wrists again.

"This is your armour now. The pain it brings is pain you are still earning. You're not going to fight me now, are you?"

Will shakes his head and tells himself he's doing this for survival. Hannibal pulls him closer, pressing forearm to forearm until the skin begins to blur. It burns, for a moment, then melds. Their chests are close, the friction of skin and hair giving way to heat and then, as though soldered, their skin forms a solid mass of the both of them, with no discernment between where one ends and the other begins. As their hips match up and form a whole, Will thinks of pulling away and feels no strength or power to do so. Like he's only able to do what Hannibal wills of him.

"Do you see?" asks the mouth, too close to his own, opening over the words.

Will's answer – a short and hot "yes" that doesn't sound like Will's voice – is trapped in the hollow made by their mouths joining, skin tugging around jaws.

Will questions whether being trapped inside Hannibal's skin was a better choice than to let the earth swallow him instead, and only hears a soothing voice – inside his head, not spoken – reminding him that this way, this way is the way it is *supposed* to be.

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It's been a week since Will's hospital discharge and he's learnt what weight of dog food he can carry before the stitching on his insides start to strain. He's moved his kitchen around so he doesn't have to stretch so far when he wants to cook, and after overdoing things in the process of rearranging, he's got things set up now in a way that lets him pretend, in short increments, that he might just be okay. He finds himself forgetting that he can't run so fast with his dogs, and he's grateful when Winston runs back to him those times he finds himself doubling over while the air in his lungs regroups. The sun is starting to melt the snow and there's a veneer to his life in these moments that he finds himself wanting to get lost in. The nightmares haven't stopped, but he's always made concessions to his lack of sleep. It feels almost like normality.

When the phone call comes, he's expecting it. He's stopped allowing himself the chance at hope that it might be Alana, that she's taking herself out of self-imposed exile.

"Kade."

"You're still in the country."

"I'm under an advised convalescence period" he tells her.

"And that period ends when?"

"Oh, I'm sure I'm fully recovered" he says. "Right as rain."

Kade seems less tolerant of his barely supressed snark than usual.

"You have your brief, and you have a timeframe."

"I'm not sure Hannibal is one for schedules. Tell me, when do you expect me to deposit him outside the FBI's doors?"

"You'll be excused from the scrutiny and hardest edges of an internal investigation for the near future, as long as Jack's condition remains unchanged."

"So, what, six weeks? Six months? Or however long it takes for a coma to *lift*? It took you over a year to notice him."

He hears the exhale of breath crackling in the phone line and imagines her positioned with her fingers on her forehead, trying to disregard the ugly truths waiting for her beyond the horizon of understanding. He smiles.

"You're to contact me – not the office, me, directly – within a week. You are to tell me only what you would be able to tell a court, and when you need involvement from the authorities, there are names of preferred agents for you to contact. Not all of them are technically ours… I'll send them across to you."

Will makes a sound like understanding and mentally prepares himself for what he needs to pack. Who to ask for help with the dogs. Who might be able to assist him out there. Wherever *there* ends up being.

“When you find him, find him with evidence. Only then are we able to assist you and only then are you on the path which keeps you out of Baltimore.”

For Kade to shed the firmer comforts of regimented bureaucracy, Will figures she must be desperate. Or indebted to someone. Both, probably.

“You’re as under the knife as I am” he says, failing to hide the wry smile in his voice.

“My head is a lot further from the chopping block than yours.”

Will hears the explanation of logistics, of funds – how they can’t authorise a budget for this, but that the wage for his classroom hours have been reviewed and that the increased payments are being applied to him retrospectively. For a brief moment, Will considers taking the money and heading out to somewhere like Malta and spending his days hiding out in the sunshine. Except, he realises, it will still be his own mind that he’s stuck with wherever he goes and somehow that’s not something he wants to commit to.

He agrees with Kade, because he has no other choice. It’s not that he wants to find Hannibal. It’s not that he wants the opportunity to see the man and get close enough to tear the skin from his face. Or that he wants the chance to find out what he’s really capable of. Or the chance to forgive and pull himself out of the rut of guilt he’s buried himself in. He’s doing this because *he has no other choice*.

-

The gates to the Verger estate seem every bit as imposing as Will’s sense of unfocused, fatalistic dread. He puts a clammy finger to the intercom and asks to speak to Mason.

“He’s resting” comes the expected reply.

“I imagine he does that a lot these days” answers Will, voice steeled by the nip of whiskey he’d helped himself to before leaving his car.

“If you’re a business associate, you’ll be making an appointment. If you’re not an associate, you are to remove yourself from the property.”

“I have information about Hannibal” he tells the metal box.

There’s a crackle and a pause.

“So does everyone else who reads Tattle Crime. Please remove yourself from the premises or we will escort you away personally.”

“I have the means to locate Hannibal” persists Will, wishing Margot would appear and smooth some of the testosterone out of the way. “He’s probably expecting me.”

The crackle again.

“Name?”

Will considers providing a false name, though he assumes there’s visual recording equipment in place too. Disguises aren’t his strongest suit right now.

“Will Graham.”

The crackle again, only this time it lasts for almost thirty seconds. Long enough for sweat to creep into Will’s hairline and stick his shirt to his chest. Long enough for him to regret not simply breaking in through one of the less ostentatious entrances to the property.

The gates open and two men dressed like airport security advance towards Will. One is taller, darker, the other more runtish in appearance. Both walk with the determined swagger of men who’ve been denied outlets for their machismo, and though Will steels his reactions for the kind of interaction this would normally invoke, he’s limited in agility. The shorter of the men reveals a baton about half a second too late for Will to get out of its way, and he feels the dull sting of it hitting the back of his knees. Buckled, he splays his hands in front of him and hopes that the fall forward will protect his midsection. The next thing he feels is the sole of a boot against his cheek, swung into place and then resting. It’s not an impulsive, aggressive motion. It’s a means to a specific end. It’s a statement of control, and potential intent.

“He wants to see you, Mr Graham” says a cool voice. The tall man – the speaker – removes his foot from Will’s face and crouches to pull his head up by his hair.

“But he wouldn’t accept you just walking in there...”

As he speaks, he pulls Will off the ground completely, holding firm as he scrabbles to regain his balance. The shorter man reaches from behind and steadies the tops of Will’s arms, pinning them to his sides with a practised grip.

“…without acknowledging that you are in debt to Mr Verger, and that you understand the magnitude of this debt.”

Knuckles connect to the bridge of Will’s nose and as hot blood gathers in his nostrils, he understands that none of this is about hurting him. It’s about keeping up appearances. It doesn’t necessarily ease the sting, or slow the drizzles of red catching in his mouth or spotting his shirt, but it reassures him that he’s less likely to receive a more damaging kind of injury. This time.

“One more?” asks the taller man, and a beat later Will feels the baton connecting to his hipbone. He grips for balance from the taller man who dutifully supports him until his feet steady. The shorter man places his hands back on Will’s arms and begins guiding him, in short and uneven steps, towards Mason’s room.

“I’d advise against looking too resilient” states the taller man, somewhat pointlessly. Mason has a fairer idea than most of what Will can withstand and he doesn’t want brought to the foreground of their conversation. The tall man introduces himself as Roscoe and makes a

hesitant move as if to volunteer a handshake, before thinking better of it and gesturing towards the tall door to Mason's current room of choice.

"It goes without saying that any movements made against his… lordship will result in your death" Roscoe states placidly. The shorter man mutters his own name as Feveirra in the fashion of someone who finds names inconvenient and not deserved by present company. All three men appear hesitant of pressing the door open, but it takes Will shuffling forward to prompt Roscoe into action.

"Are you ready, Mr Verger?" he calls, arm blocking Will's over the handle.

"Please. Come in."

Will curbs the smile at Mason's vaguely mechanised voice and the restrictions it carries, and wipes some of the blood from his nose with a shirt sleeve. It blots on the blue patterned fabric and continues to drizzle out of him. The more blood, the more theatre. The easier to appease Mason.

Mason is propped in his bed with a tablet arranged in front of him and a dial by his right hand, the kind that's found on motorized mobility chairs and Will finds himself wondering if he has the power to charge the bed across the room.

He resists the instinct to conceal the discomfort from the fresh injuries, allowing his slow walk forward to be hampered by a gentle limp. His expression sits in contrast; even with the blood – or maybe because of it – he looks battle ready. Or like a kicked dog coming back for a fresh round.

"You know where he is."

However the interface between Mason's remaining voice and his digitized assistance works, it still hasn't mastered how to pose a statement as a question.

Will waits for another three full seconds before answering, in case there's more breath or words to come out. He doesn't want to interrupt; that would be rude.

"We both want to find him" states Will.

Mason rolls his eyes above the face mask and Will thinks about puppet shows he watched as a kid.

"I want him to find you. And for your…your mutilated corpse to be the thing that tells me where he is."

Will shifts his weight onto his other leg and pads at the slowing trickle from his nose with the back of his hand.

"My mutilated corpse won't help you get any closer to him" Will tells him. "But I'm here because you want to find him and he's going to find me first"

Will is grateful that Mason no longer has the wherewithal to smile. Because Will doesn't trust the words coming from his own mouth, doesn't know if he believes them, but he hopes. And Mason's opinion of it all seems to cheapen that, somehow.

"Oh, I expect he will. And I expect him to kill you when you reach each other."

Mason sounds exhausted already.

"It would make my position easier if *you* were to reach him before it comes to that."

Mason frowns and if his mask weren't so rigid, if his face still existed, there'd be the snarl that matches his confused eyes.

"I'm willing to assist you with his…with retribution" elaborates Will. Lying comes easier, these days. "If you're willing to put aside your habit of attempting to kill me in the interim."

"Why. You're both due a little…retribution."

Will readjusts himself, emphasises his vulnerability. Promotes the impression of himself as the bait that Mason is hoping to use.

"You understand that the circumstances that led to your…your *incident* were wholly orchestrated by him, Mason?" Will takes a step forward and arms on either side of him tug him back.

"Please. You were no angel of mercy, Will."

"I never said I was merciful."

The air in the room sits heavy as Mason refills his lungs. Will patiently waits for him to recharge.

"I have men in Verona" states Mason. Will catches the momentary glance passed between his two guardians but he doesn't need that to know that Mason is lying. He just can't figure out why.

"If you find him and you get in my way. Or you kill him..."

"I'm not planning on killing him."

"Then stay home. Let my men do this."

"Your men won't get close enough. Not without me."

A throat clears behind Will's left ear and he realises that he's been more insulting than intended.

"At least let me warn when the authorities are getting too close" asks Will and it sounds too much like pleading, like supplication. The kind of tone that Mason expects but is impervious

to. He'd have responded better, Will thinks, if he'd just been able to punch him in the throat and not given him the opportunity to feel in control.

"I'll know that long before you. Stay out of my way."

"Fine, but –"

"Bored of your face. You're dripping on the carpet. Leave."

Before the last syllable is complete, Will is being led out of the room by Roscoe and Feverria, through the hallway and into the courtyard.

The sunlight is too harsh but there's a rigidly postured silhouette on the back of a horse advancing on the space between the three men and the gates to the property.

"Will" says Margot.

Will looks up to her, sees the harder edge of stone in her expression and suspects that she's still not as free as she'd hoped to be.

"I know why you're here, Will."

Roscoe and Feverria shuffle awkwardly at Will's sides, unsure whether to humour the exchange or to rush the man off the property as instructed.

"…And I'd advise you against riding my brother's coat tails to the dilapidated corners of Europe."

"It seems I have a similar aim to your brother" states Will, not considering that this is not an angle that Margot would take favourably.

"I very much doubt that" she says, dismounting, "unless you fantasise about seeing yourself skewered, flayed and burned, though possibly not in that order. He was never that specific."

There's a feeling of familiarity to this sort of threat, like it's the only kind of language Will is used to hearing in relation to himself.

"So I can't count you as an ally in this" he says, hopelessness creeping into the softer edges of his voice.

Margot walks round the mare to where Will is standing and places a gloved hand on his shoulder, with a thumb on his collarbone. Roscoe and Feverria move to accommodate her.

"Just because I'm a better person than Mason..." she pinches at his skin, then rounds her palm across his shoulder blade, "…doesn't mean I'm a better person than anyone else."

She pushes and twists in a smooth motion, forcing Will's arm at a wrong angle to his frame. It's a small gesture of intimidation like a chance to express the kind of power that she's only been at the mercy of, until recently. Like she's showing off. Like she doesn't need or want

help, and finds it insulting. Or, like there are cameras on the four of them and she has to play along. Will realises he doesn't care which it is.

"Get him off my property" she instructs dismissively as Roscoe and Feverria walk him beyond the confines of the estate and set him loose beyond its gates.

He's a second away from climbing into his car, ready to slide into the warmth of the beat-up machine and curse his stupidity, when he sees a spiral of titian in his peripheral vision.

He thinks he'd rather take another kick to the face than deal with Freddie's bright smile, but she's never been the kind to humour his wishes, unspoken or otherwise.

"You knew this would happen" he states, as soon as she's close enough to hear him. He seats himself in his car and considers closing the door and pulling away before she has a chance to answer.

"I suspected. Want a tissue?"

"Thanks. So what, you were hoping that, what, Mason's people would go in for the kill and you'd have a better story than Matthew Brown?"

Freddie looks at him as though he's an idiot. It's an expression she's been better at reproducing in Will's company.

"Where did he tell you to go?" asks Freddie, ignoring his accusations.

"Verona. Why?"

"And I assume you know he's lying about that?"

"Obviously. How do *you* know he's lying about that?"

"I needed to know if he was *actually* trying to send you to the source, or just into whatever traps he's trying to set for you. He'll be relieved if you don't fall for it."

The insight Freddie is showing seems more valuable but also more sinister for it. She's always been ahead of most people when it comes to scrabbling around for details but the territory around this seems more dangerous, even for her.

"Freddie, how do you know this? Has he contacted you?"

She barely hides her disappointment when she tells him "no."

"He's in Dresden" she announces breezily. "I imagine he won't stay there long, unless something piques his interest. He's expecting Mason to follow him there. Mason's already looking at investments over there" she tells him and the smugness of her words is deeply upsetting.

“Why is your information worth trusting?” he asks.

“Because it’s come from someone with a talent for eavesdropping and manipulation and who you should have considered asking first?”

“I *did* ask you.”

Will rests his hand on the door and swings it shut. There is a limit to his patience for crypticism when his nerves are firing up and his bones are craving painkillers.

“I meant Margot” shouts Freddie to Will’s closed window.

- -

Chapter End Notes

Next update will be reasonably soon - because I'm impatient to get to the filth too.

# Magpie

Chapter Notes

> This was...longer than planned. The next instalment will be up in 24 hours, and then there'll be a little more time to digest between updates. Thank you for reading!

Will wakes to a feeling like a knife in his gut and a sound like screaming pigs.

The sensation is familiar; the sound less so. He's loosely aware that it might not be real but this doesn't stop him from reaching to his stomach to hold it in place.

He's surrounded by pigs – sweating beasts with gnashing tusks, chewing on meat and it doesn't take him looking down to know that it's bits of *him* that they're eating. He thinks he's screaming but it's lost in a gargle of red.

To his side, there's a sheath of brown hair and a scarred back, knotted with another body, damp skin and red curls coiling into the brown. It's intimate and Will knows he shouldn't be looking. The touches between the two are both softer and more forceful than any he'd ever managed and he knows, understands, that they are not there for him, not the way they are for each other. His eyes rest instead on the holes appearing in his skin, the chunks of meat being cut from his middle.

"This doesn't concern you" says Margot, dour eyes turning to address him with a kindness in the disdain. "They just need feeding, is all."

It's her hand holding the knife and Will's getting so used to feeling pain that he's barely registering each new incision. Freddie's hand overlaps Margo's, a new knife, a gilded green-handled blade between her knuckles. She turns to him, mouth slick and asks him really, what did he expect?

The pigs adopt the mannerisms of Mason – jerky antagonism and greed – as they nose into him, tearing fresh holes from his legs and the neater gaps already cut out of him.

"It's where you're going to end up" Margo tells him with her back to him again, her fingers tangling in Freddie's hair and their mouths linking together hot and hungry. "We're just helping you along."

There's a feeling of intestines, wet and sprawling over the remaining skin on his ribs. There's a swelling tide of red soaking into his bones, and the *pain*…

"This is kinder to you than he would be" says Freddie, her fingers idly lifting layers of skin away from him and letting the beasts lick it from her hands. "This way, at least you only have to answer to the pigs."

Will wakes in a sheen of sweat with a newfound understanding of how Freddie's been getting her information.

- -

The corridors of the BSHCI don't seem so narrow, but when Will navigates through them he still feels the phantoms of shackles keeping his steps small and his shoulders curved. As with most of his adopted ticks for self-preservation, he's not quite shed them yet. The absence of external comfort has him scraping at the insides of his own skull for anything to keep him anchored, no matter how small or futile.

The orderly guiding him makes no acknowledgment, no reassurance or annoyance, despite recognising Will both as former patient and now visitor.

"You are not to pass anything through the bars…" begins the orderly with the familiar monotone that seems to reverberate through all the staff in the institute.

They pass the row of cages – all empty – and Will assumes that this particular method of humiliation has been disregarded since Chilton's enforced absence from the institution.

"…Do not initiate physical contact with the patient" comes the final warning as the orderly opens the reinforced fibreglass door to the interview room. He assumes that the privacy rules still apply and that whatever he discusses in this cube won't be subject to analysis. He nods, ducks his head instinctively and reminds himself that he's on the other side of the table, this time.

"Turns out you're not a hawk after all, are you?"

The way Matthew Brown is sat, leant back against his chair and hands splayed in front of him as though the chain is only decorative, it's the closest to a swagger that a person can get whilst remaining stationary.

"That's not entirely accurate" states Will with drawn vowels. There's too much that depends on Matthew buying into the belief that Will's is the side that will lead him to notoriety and a true kind of freedom, not just release from an institution. He needs him to believe.

"You're not who I thought you were. You had us all fooled, Mr Graham."

Matthew looks disinterested in anything but the sound of his own voice and the power he believes it holds. The adoration he'd applied to his former patient is faded and he's sitting with nothing but unfulfilled intention. He kicks his legs against his chair with impatience.

"There have been a lot of misconceptions about who many of us –"

"You're more of a magpie, I'd say."

There's nothing to be gained from defending himself, so Will lets him continue.

“You’re bad luck on your own” says Matthew, chewing over the words, smile pinching at the sides of his mouth. “Got me shot, got me landed in here. We were supposed to do great things.”

“You’re only in here pending formal re-evaluation” Graham reminds him calmly. His fingers are knotted together in front of him and he’s trying to unravel the tension locked into his knuckles without drawing attention to it.

“So you’re engineering my imminent release?”

Will remains silent.

“You owe me. You didn’t want to succeed when you asked me to kill Hannibal, but you put that failure on me, and now, there’s a *hole* in me.” Matthew rotates his left shoulder, and it’s the first time the cuffs round his wrists seem to impose any restriction on him since Will got here.

“That’s not the fault of my actions.”

“I don’t like being lied to, Will Graham. You should know that I react badly to it.”

Will wonders how similar their bullet scars might be, but decides against bonding based on their wounded parts. Matthew Brown has the look of someone so abhorred by weakness that he’d kill to be regarded as a notch higher on the food chain, and from how they used to be, he’s never been one to suffer weakness unless he’s the cause of it.

“I can’t get you out, not yet” Will elaborates. Matthew looks interested. “But I know someone who’s prepared to talk to you, and move things along. The FBI hates a scandal and she’s the best chance you have of shaming them into a release – into letting you out, I mean.”

“Miss Lounds has already told me” says Brown and Will resists the urge to roll his eyes. Trusting her with a bargaining chip – not even *trusting* – more just *hoping* that the reason would penetrate and she’d keep her nose out for long enough to let him negotiate – was more optimism than he should have allowed himself.

“Your story’s not out there yet” states Will, jaw tight. “Which means she’s waiting for the right prompt to share it. It’s just…the thing is, you’re needed.” He lets the association between him asking a favour *now*, and the things he asked for *then* to register. Sees something like anticipation flashing in his expression and then continues, calm and as though he’s saying nothing personal at all; “and you’re needed outside.”

Matthew laughs a hollow cackle. “I’m not your lackey, little magpie. You come in here all busted up and expect me to believe that you’re the instrument of terror I wanted you to be?”

Will looks outside to the orderly with his back to the glass, checks the angle of the camera facing into the room, and calculates.

Any sudden movement, he knows, will attract the attention of both and now there’s no Chilton, the new chief of staff is an unknown quantity. He doesn’t want to take risks in here,

not when he's still feeling like more of a prisoner in this place than his interviewee.

"You're after *him*, aren't you? The person I thought you were? You want to catch him."

Will nods, burrows his stare into Matthew's cold, livid eyes, waits for the rest of the taunt.

"I wanna catch him too" hisses Brown, leaning towards the centre of the table, hands edging closer towards Will's. "Because I wanna *be* him, so where do you think that leaves your FBI endorsed –"

Will kicks his legs under the table, wraps his feet around Matthew's left leg and yanks. It's a clumsy move and his purchase is loose, but it's enough to briefly unseat the prisoner, causing him to pull on the chains around his wrist and dismantle his semblance of control.

"Don't be another one who underestimates me" smiles Will, waving dismissively at the orderly outside the room and feeling the reminder of power over another wrapping round him like a much missed blanket.

"You want us to work together?" asks Matthew, faintly humbled and wearing his intrigue on his face, tempered only by a curl to his lips that still hints at disbelief.

"It's the only way I can see to get you out" says Will, noting that right now, he's closer in motive and method to Kade Prurnell than he's comfortable with.

"Not what Freddie says" smiles Brown, his feet resting on top of Will's and resting – pushing – forcefully into the floor. Will makes no move to upset them, aware of the increased interest from the orderly outside. "She gives it a day after the article goes out until someone from Quantico arranges a transfer to somewhere…else."

"Why hasn't she run it yet then, Matthew? Could it be that you shouldn't trust in anything Freddie says?"

Will wraps his hands over Brown's as he speaks, inverting the under-table gesture with a gentle force that reminds him of Hannibal.

"You trust her too. But so far…" Brown punctuates his words by curling his thumbs up, stroking Will's hands in tense little curls, a deliberate reminder of his comforting techniques from Will's internment time. A gesture to tell Will that he hasn't forgotten what made him vulnerable back then, and that he expects to be able to summon that all again. For all this is Matthew buying into Will's design, it's still feeling like he's laying a trap for himself to fall into. "So far you're all talk, magpie. We'll only make any progress when I'm out."

For all Matthew's defiance, he's starting to speak again as though he's part of a pair. Easily appeased, but still so desperately in need of having his own sense of power confirmed to him.

Will looks to the orderly who seems listlessly distracted by something in the periphery and is reassured that that the subtleties of their interaction will remain unnoticed. .

"When you're free from here…" Will pushes into the hard vein on Matthew's left wrist as punctuation. It's proof of strength, of power, that he's still something to be reckoned with. It's

also an invitation; Brown matches the gesture in reverse, grabbing the other wrist and pushing his feet further into Will's as he does. Overstatement, thinks Will, is one of Brown's problems. Both men refuse to flinch, to register that the other is causing them if not pain, then discomfort. Will's right hand slides further up Brown's forearm, pulling at the skin in an approximation of a Chinese burn. It's met with a short nail scratching at the inside of his wrist; a promise, then.

"…We'll move away from just talking."

Both wrists twist away from Brown as Will gestures to the orderly that he's ready to leave, and his feet kick free with nothing more than an awkward shuffle. If Brown is consistent with his own sense of ego, this will annoy him; the ease with which his temporary power is dismantled. Will sees him then, sees him as the boy at a school given some slight insult, then plotting for days to devise a way to make the insulter regret having misjudged him. Imagines the grandiosity of weedy little Matthew pinning a person to the ground and hitting – no, biting – until there's blood and a string of youth psychiatrists and a residual fear from everyone who knows who he is. Sees him a few years later, moved away, still stuck in the mindset but knowing how he needs to keep it better hidden. Consoling himself with thoughts of overturning his imagined oppressors with theatrical acts of cruelty, waiting for opportunities to act on them like waiting for desert plants to bloom. Will smiles, taut. Hopes that frustration coiled inside Matthew Brown will unfurl into something monstrous that can be used when he gets out, because Will's not wholly sure he can do what needs to be done without a little spite or motivation.

"Soon."

The glass door closes on Matthew Brown's twisting smile.

—

There's post waiting for Will back in Wolf Trap. White and brown envelopes with insurance codes and payslip references, hospital requests for check-ups and scripts, the kind of letters so mundane that a person can take a moment to pretend that these neatly printed words are as important as life gets.

The burgundy envelope that slides out of the pile – heavier in weight and almost silken to the touch – stops Will's breath for half a second. Sweat is meted out through his pores as he imagines the possibility of it. There's a smell that comes from the paper that's something musky, tempered with something floral – uncharacteristic, for Hannibal. His hands find the opening and the texture of the fold tells him that the letter's been opened once already and his stomach plummets. Of course his post would be monitored. He turns it over between his fingers, ignores Winston brushing against his legs and looks to the handwriting, planning to memorise each detail of the letter. Anything they've analysed, he needs his own interpretation of it. It's that he's being thorough, meticulous. It's not that he's hesitant about seeing what's inside.

In looking at the clipped elegance of the lettering, he nearly misses the more crucial detail of the address – which is not in Wolf Trap. It's to a W. Graham in a remote address in some town near Maryland and Will panics in case he's been wrong all along, that the address on the envelope is a clue and that Hannibal's back on American soil and that however they meet, it's going to be sooner and faster than he's ready for. It's another panicked breath before he registers how little sense this makes, and that the letter found its way through his letter box and he starts to realise that Hannibal would know that his mail is being searched, too. He virtually ensured it by sending him post via the offices at Quantico. This means that Hannibal has someone here he can use as a messenger.

There's a familiarity in the headache that pushes against Will's temple and he considers adding the customary aspirin to relieve it, then thinks that maybe his organs have enough chemicals to process just now. He keeps the letter between his fingers, pours a glass of water, then a whiskey and shh-es Winston away. Winston doesn't obey and wraps himself around Will's feet from the kitchen to his armchair, waiting for him to settle before whimpering plaintively.

"Not now, Winston" he says, one hand idly ruffling his scraggy hair. Ignoring his dismissal, the other dogs amble in and form a soft pile at his feet and Will realises how far he's getting from being the simple, careful person who used to take comfort in this. He holds the letter, ignores the shake in his fingers and opens.

The handwriting is sharp and elegant; as though he'd ever send something less than a display piece. Will wishes for a moment that Hannibal could just let go of his pretensions once in a while, scrawl something short and dirty on a post-it note or just tear a page from a notebook and scratch something in biro. He supposes that if that were to happen, Hannibal would no longer be Hannibal and by extension, he'd no longer be Will. He gulps at the drink before focusing on the content of the words, not their presentation.

"Will,

I fear you are on a pivot at this moment, balancing precariously between pursuit of your truest self, and what other people may perceive as redemption.

Your finding me is inevitable; though I'd ask that you carefully consider where the pivot places you. If you still mean to impinge on my liberty, then I will destroy you. It will pain me to do so; more than the wounds we have dealt each other thus far. But I will not hesitate.

If, when you find me, your intentions have aligned with your most intrinsically formed instincts, I can only wish for your visit to Europe to hasten. I trust that you have healed sufficiently for the next stage of your journey to begin,

H."

Will inhales a long, juddering breath and sinks the remaining measure of whiskey in his glass. The thicker the veil he can apply between the insight Hannibal offers, between the decision he knows he needs to make and all its ghastly consequences, the easier it will be for him. He pours another measure out, this one more of a fist than a finger.

He turns the paper over, not expecting words – as though Hannibal's meticulous approach to letter writing would somehow object to something as economical as using both sides. The additional text, in flourishing strikes of black ink, drops his stomach further.

"Consider that those who are aware of your movements may be continuing to misjudge your motives. With this in mind, I trust that you understand the use of the services of Ms Lounds in delivering this to you. I believe Ms Lounds is more aware of the consequences of withholding or publishing these words far more your former colleagues."

So, Freddie knows what Will knows. And the resealed envelope – well, that would explain the perfume. Will considers for a moment that he used to be faster with suppositions and deductions like these, and wonders if he's dulling himself through drink and through painkillers, and lets the thought hover and disperse as he takes another full sip.

Fucking Freddie.

The annoyance at her increasingly persistent insinuation into every part of his life thus far grates; gets under his skin in a way that the drink can't purge clean. It's a game, to her. And it should be to him, to a point. There are players and negotiations and tricks and chances and a result that each of them is seeking – each different from the other. It's just that it's becoming increasingly difficult to resent the imposition of things as obvious and irksome as strategy over what he grudgingly admits is an emotional response.

He hardly feels like there's the time to assess how he feels about Hannibal when his every movement towards him is punctuated by Freddie or Kade. And, he supposes, Matthew too, if he gets out when he's supposed to.

- -

Matthew Brown's release is kept low profile. Freddie's article had produced such damning inferences that, as predicted, the FBI were pressed into a position whereby they had to prove that the mismanagement of the case had been addressed. That a murder had been attempted could not be wholly proven as the evidence linked to identifying it was more damaging when turned back on the FBI. Ineptitude, though rife, was the biggest threat to their security and not the sort of weakness Kade would allow to be communicated readily. She personally oversaw his release and ensured that Matthew was provided with a taxi and no questions were asked as to his destination.

# Bang

On the phone, Alana tells Will that she doesn't want to know where he's going. She agrees to take the dogs – agrees that Applesauce will appreciate the company and says nothing of herself. Will tries to coax more from her but thinks better of it. She's had the most to reassess, and her decision to withdraw from everything linked to the man she'd wanted to trust; Will envies her for that too much to try and pull her back in.

"I'll come by to collect them tomorrow" she tells him, voice full of other words that won't come out, not now, probably never.

"Tell me when you're back and please, Will…"
He waits and whatever is sitting unspoken is too scared to come out.

The whiskey in his glass is changing hue with each tilt of his hand, swirling through shades of autumnal golds and ambers.

"Will. Just…don't tell me what you get up to. I don't want to know. When you come back –"

"You expect me to come back? In one piece?"

The words sound sharper than he intended. He suspects he's asking himself more than her, but he supposes some validation wouldn't hurt.

"…Just, just get your dogs back and don't tell me about it. About him."

"You could be – "

"Don't."

"I mean, thanks. Thank you. For the dogs, I mean."

"Goodbye, Will."

He's not feeling the good part so much.

"Bye, Alana."

-

It's around 9pm when the dogs start barking. It's a chorus of discontent and Will's used to them enough to know it's nothing so simple as hunger or the slowly nearing storm outside. He reaches for a handgun as instinct and wonders what small good left in him deserves so many guardians.

There's not the customary impertinence of Freddie's knock. There'd be a car and a lot more noise if it was Mason's men. Instead, it's a nervy, forceful few raps, unevenly spaced and heavy handed.

Will unlocks the inner door and shushes the dogs away. He slides the gun into his back pocket and keeps his left hand on it as his right reaches for the door. It seems unlikely that Matthew would want to kill him – doesn't seem like part of his agenda – but there's a limit to what Will is prepared to leave to chance or good faith.

He pulls the door back, hissing at the dogs as they crowd towards the new visitor.

"So, I'm out" announces Matthew unnecessarily, shunting Will out of the way and letting the door slam shut behind him, upsetting the ramp he'd left out for Alana.

Will wants to groan at the spectacle of bravado from the newly released prisoner, at how his swinging shoulders and upwards tilted chin is part of an act that isn't needed, not here, but he's got a part to play too.

"Drink?" asks Will, calmly gathering his breath as though this whole scenario had been his orchestration.

"Your place is not what I imagined" states Matthew, looking for new spaces to impose himself on.

Will pours two glasses of whiskey – his own glass still wet from the last.

"There seem to be misconceptions about me wherever I turn" says Will.

Matthew advances towards him, takes the outheld glass and Will's and places them on the shelf, knocking the ceramic canine figurines out of the way.

"Except," he says with breath too close and hot in Will's ear, arms outstretched either side of his head. "I remember you from the hospital and I know you weren't making it up then."

Will nods, remembers being pulled from Chilton's sessions with kinder hands than he was used to, remembers the currency of favours that Matthew had suggested, and how he'd acquiesce because really, he had nothing to lose, and because maybe, he'd never felt so valued. His knees never bruised that dark from the stone floors, and the intimacy of touch, of being held and coaxed into covert gasping orgasms just out of range of Chilton's watchful eye, it made the endless parade of restraints and cruelty in the institution seem more gentle than it was.

"Knowing one part of me doesn't make you the authority on the rest" he says, trying not to look too bored by Matthew's forcedly dominant posturing.

"But now I just need to be clear" says Matthew, leaning in so that his eyes are too close to Will's to focus on "that you owe *me* now."

Will spits out a small cough. "So you're saying you want me to leave the cuffs on *you* when…?"

He doesn't finish the sentence. Doesn't want to outlay who got and who gets to do the fucking.

He grips Matthew's forearms as he's speaking, twists them and uses the right one to propel Matthew so he's face up against his living room wall. "Or did you mean you still need me to prove myself *worthy* of your help?"

He presses his legs against the back of Matthew's, aware that the reluctant beginning of an erection is pressing through his trousers. Power, it seems, is speeding up his responses.

Matthew's smirk almost subdues it and Will finds himself pushing his smiling face into the wall, covering it with his hand. When Matthew starts licking at his fingers in tight little flickers, then sucking as much of the tips of them as the angle allows, Will knows he's secured his allegiance. Obedience, even. He uses his right hand to find a zipper for Matthew's trousers and instead finds the elastic waistband giving way under his knuckles. Matthew backs into Will, a small movement that increases the friction between the tip of Will's cock and the too much clothing around it. The tautness grows, pulling up through to his stomach and the stab of pain that comes with flexing old muscles threatens to stop his momentum.

His fingers reach to Matthew's cock and its hardness – the evidence of him being just as susceptible to the nuances of physical interaction as any human – reaffirms his feeling of control, taps into the experiences of past fucks; when it had been the kind of exchange that wasn't tainted by misunderstanding, or horror. As he runs a thumb along the tip, spreads the tiny amount of precum around the head and massages the shaft in even pulses of movement, he regrets not trying to communicate more often by simply fucking. There's a clarity to the sensations that things like words tend to obscure.

Matthew's mouth turns from sucking to biting, so Will retaliates clamping it shut with his damp hand. Matthew twitches in discomfort, as though it's an indignity too far. Will lets go a moment later, pushes himself further towards Matthew, keeping the shield of clothing between them. It's almost killing him to stop from punching right into him but he knows that condoms are too far away to reach and any break in the motion is enough to give Matthew the upper hand. He can't have that. This is his turn.

"Not fair" breathes Matthew, the urgency of his breath a sign that he wasn't receiving the same attention at Baltimore that Will had been privy to.

"Nothing is. Get on your knees."

Will slides his hands away from Matthew and draws a sad gasp out of him at loss of contact. Pushing into his close-cropped hair, his shoulder, he manoeuvres him away from the wall, round to face him and onto the carpet.

It's supposed to be a smooth movement but Matthew grabs him by the hips, hands spreading beneath Will's shirt and snaking round to the small of his back. The tug at his gut winds him for a second – a sharp pain that disappears quickly, lets his senses return to realise that Matthew's grabbed the gun from his back pocket. It takes another breath to realise that this hasn't diminished his erection and by the next, Will feels his back hit the floor. His dogs are

keening and Will's distracted, worrying about them getting in the way. He's knocked back into focus as Matthew presses the gun into his neck, pushing the barrel up into his jaw.

"You don't get to stay in charge."

The power of the gun is a myth; Will could disarm Matthew with a push of his wrist, could distract him by stroking behind his ears in that feathery way that always used to get him to agree to most things, or he could change tactic completely and jerk his knees up into his groin. He finds he doesn't want to, finds himself opening his mouth as the barrel moves further up, as it nudges against his teeth. He reaches to pull Matthew's pants further down, leaving the waistband stretched over his thighs and his white shirt hanging down from his too-firm stomach and his leaking cock. There's hunger in his the way he licks at his lips and in the way he looks down, the spark in his eyes somehow brighter the more he drops his gaze.

"You missed me?" asks Will, the open mouth of the gun echoing. He's smiling around the barrel and he knows it's annoying Matthew, knows that every confidence he shows is dismantling belief in his own power. *Good*. If he lets Matthew feel like he's won, he wants to feel like at least some kind of a prize. A challenge.

"Missed this."

His voice is already rough and Will's wondering how he's holding himself together so well if he's been so long without touch.

"Get those off" he gestures to Will's trousers, and it's sounding like his hospital voice again. Will's trying to avoid feeling the way he used to when he was, despite his convictions, pretty much at Matthew's behest. He fidgets with his own zipper, pushes the denim as far down as he can and the way he has to arch his back to reach, it pulls on the pulsing tension in his groin. He'd try and deal with that himself but there's a limit to how much he wants to antagonise the man on top of him. Not while he's still aware that the gun might be a prop, but it's still loaded.

Matthew reaches to his own back pocket with his left hand and just outside Will's line of vision, fingers open a foil square. His gun hand is wavering, knocking against Will's teeth and the carelessness makes him nervous. Will reaches up to assist – takes the sheath from his hand and presses the air from the tip of the condom. He hesitates – considers putting it on himself instead and to hell with him. Matthew's palm presses warningly on his chest and he opts for supplication as the safest option. It's what he's used to.

There's a moment of anticipation which reminds him of dread – Matthew was never careful enough for that first move for it not to feel violent somehow, but Will's aware that it was only back *then* that he was trying to avoid the pain. This time, he's a little more comfortable with it. He closes his eyes as Matthew spits, realises he's not heard the words he was saying.

"My terms" he's saying, and his voice is lost in heavy breath and honestly, Will's not holding out much hope for this lasting too much longer. Matthew's face is already flushing and there's sweat beading across his forehead. The gun slides out of his mouth and Will flicks the nose of it with his tongue. A tiny gesture to show that he's still more in control of Matthew than he is of him right now.

“What,” he challenges, hands reaching to wrap around Matthew’s narrow hips, bitten nails pressing into the skin to delay Matthew’s gratification. Matthew’s negotiating the angle of Will’s legs, pushing them up and not bothering to take the jeans all the way off. The way his knees are barely parted, held in place by the denim – it’s more restrictive than half the methods they ever used on him in Baltimore and Will’s taking as much comfort as arousal from it. The tip pushes in – warm, solid, and the small girth is still more than Will can take in silence. His legs are obscuring his view of Matthew’s face but he can feel the satisfaction radiating from him. The next push – too quick, always too fast and too eager – it stings, burns. Spit is never enough and yet somehow the pain of it seems righteously deserved. Will pushes himself onto it, kneads the flesh of Matthew’s ass and tries to force more vigour from his thrusting.

“More” he’s saying, and the first time it’s a command but it’s turning into a plea. He grabs again, disguising his submission with violent gestures but Matthew’s seeing through it. “Shut up” he tells him. Will moves a hand to his own cock, needing the friction and wishing for Matthew to put more aggression, more control into it. To take charge in a way that’s complete and unfightable. The way he imagines Hannibal might, if they’d ever got that close. The jerking motion slows and Will panics, like this is the signal that he’s nearly done and he’ll have to take care of himself and just…it *can’t*…not *yet*.

He’s empty; he’s empty and Matthew’s prying his hand away from his cock, and there’s too much cold air around him. He’s pulled out of the haze of need and given a glimpse of how far from negotiation he is in this moment. All eagerness and acquiescence and no fight left in him because who is he to fight, really?

“Not yet.”

The impinging self-loathing abates as Matthew jabs a finger into him. His short fingernail catches on the way in and this sharpness, this is more vivid than the pithy games they’re playing with each other. Will claws at Matthew, wrests his captured hand free and runs lines down his chest trying to break the tight skin. The smack that catches his face – heavy and metallic – seems like a continuation of affection and he pushes onto the finger – fingers, now, his face hot from the impact. “Fuck you” he mouths, reaching for himself again. The gun nudges into the last vowel sound and this is his cue. He opens wider, and imagines the trigger being pulled.

“Go on.”

The movement inside him stills and all he can feel is the insistence of the handgun knocking at the inside of his mouth. Will looks up and sees only the blur of metal and Matthew’s pale fingers, sweating. Matthew’s face is an apparition behind his straining legs but the smirk, his smirk is almost omnipotent. He understands.

He laps a tongue over the shaft of the barrel and there’s a jerk inside him in response. He closes his mouth around it, feels his cheeks hollowing, tastes oil, and clenches as Matthew pushes further into him. Pavlovian conditioning is not new to him; he repeats, performs, licks with the attentiveness he used to receive and feels fuller with every movement from Matthew, breaks his act to smile at the shaking exhale that ripples the air between them.

“Get yourself off” instructs Matthew, voice wavering, and Will realises he’s been waiting for his permission, that his own hands have been useless until given an order. When he wraps both hands on himself, the aggression he uses feels deserved and he’s swallowing the question of what Hannibal might say about that. Focuses on the barrel of the gun and the pulling at his gut and the burning. Growls through the hollow tube of metal as Matthew pulls his fingers – his *hand* – out of him. An arm is wrapped around his legs as Matthew’s cock slides in and it’s not taking the same space that’s just been emptied; the friction is less and Will’s pulling harder at himself to compensate, leaking but still lacking, somehow.

“I win” he hears and feels the unmistakeable ripple of Matthew’s orgasm shuddering into him through the veil of latex. “I win.”

He feels the warm metal of the gun at the back of his throat and suppresses a gag. He doesn’t feel aligned, like this. It’s all so close and yet…

There’s the firm click of the trigger being cocked – it vibrates through Will’s teeth, and in a beat of terror, or completion, he lets himself go. He feels the *heat* and *frustration* and everything ending and starting at once. He cries out in a rushing breath and feels the nerves running through him dilate, slurs as the gun is gently eased from his mouth and the safety reapplied. Lets the trembles seep from his bones as Matthew pushes his legs down, straightening his bent knees and sinking into the carpet next to him.

“It’ll be good, working together” he says, voice low in Will’s ear and hand slung across his damp shirt. Will stops himself from reciprocating any gesture of tenderness; holds onto an idea that he cannot give any more of his need to Matthew. He murmurs something like agreement and makes no move to shift the heavy hand on his chest, turning his head away in case there’s anything left in his expression that might give him away.

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# Ego

Chapter Notes

> Update delayed due to neurotic editing. I'm considering uploading these in smaller chunks...

“We’re not getting anywhere here, magpie.”

It’s two days later and Matthew and Will are in a shared hotel room in Dresden, paid up for two weeks and fast becoming more confining than Baltimore. Sharing doesn’t sit comfortably with Will and he’s finding himself gazing out of the window, immersing himself in the idea of the city around them. Dresden has the look of something brutal yet elegant, still wearing the injuries dealt it decades hence and looking all the more beautiful for it. Will imagines that Hannibal’s decision to come here – if Freddie’s information is to be trusted – was not even slightly accidental. The architecture has a severity and serenity to it that becomes Hannibal’s nature, and the resilience of the place…Will suspects Hannibal might see some of Will in that.

It’s just that the room that contains them is bland, impersonal and too little space for Matthew’s frustrations.

“It’s not going to happen as fast as you want it to” Will tells him, hiding from the awareness that Matthew is probably right; the local newspapers have no suggestions that the city could be harbouring a merciless cannibal.

Will’s grasp of the German language is sparse and Matthew’s is worse, but the kind of clues he’d be looking for – elaborate death tableaus or disappearances of coarser members of society – all appear to be absent. Matthew’s already losing interest in Will and disappointed at the lack of violence beyond their impatient fucks; distractions from the greater purposes they both believe themselves to be following.

“Nothing happens fast with you” comments Matthew, looking pointedly at the way Will is now bent over the corner of the bed, pressing into the skin on his chest to distract from the rising throb of his scar. He hisses faintly at Matthew.

Matthew pours instant coffee sachets into the white mugs that came with the room, splashing some of the hot murky liquid on the white tabletop. Will finds himself pining for the extravagance of Hannibal’s tastes and for his more refined approach to dealing with irritation.

“We’d be stupid to rush” says Will, reaching to the table for one of the mugs and immediately regretting the stretching motion.

Matthew answers by blowing at the surface of his coffee and taking a noisy sip through his teeth.

And now, Will’s pining for a time when simplicity and pragmatism was enough for him. He’s not giving himself enough of a chance to consider the other aspects of Hannibal’s company that he’s missing, or thinking of; Matthew stares expectantly, like he’s waiting for Will to present him with the opportunities for murderous glory that he flew out here for.

“It’s the markets. The boutiques.”

“I didn’t come out here for shopping” Matthew says. His fingers drill at the side of his mug and he’s like a child with his impatience.

Will pinches the bridge of his nose, ignores the thud of a swelling headache and reaches for his painkillers. There’s a memory of Hannibal’s house, of the ornaments and tokens of extravagance that littered the place, trinkets of superiority. He washes the tramadol and codeine down with coffee, letting the caffeine rouse the more muddled corners of his brain before the meds have a chance to soften them again.

“If we want to find out where he’s been, where he is, we need to look for the places his taste would lead him to. Expensive places. Galleries. He’s…precocious, that way.”

Matthew looks unimpressed and sucks more coffee through his teeth. His manners, Will thinks, are appalling, and he harbours a small hope that if they do both find their way to Hannibal, that he’ll think the same. Reject him on grounds of good taste alone. He ignores the times that Hannibal welcomed him in to his home, unkempt and ragged and stinking of dog.

“Until we find some unfortunate strung up by their entrails in a public display, our best bet is hunting out cuisine.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I know more than you.”

It’s enough to shut Matthew up and spur him into dressing for the day. Simple clothes; t-shirt and slim black trousers. Nondescript. Will shrugs out of his t-shirt and replaces it with a black shirt and grey pants, the front seam still intact from being stashed in his luggage. He feels comfortable, this way. Like he’s going to work. He looks to Matthew’s meagre luggage and considers that perhaps the two of them should invest in more clothes, depending on how long they’ll end up out here.

It’s not, he thinks, that being stuck in this new place with no moorings beyond those offered by Matthew’s demanding touches, that he’s feeling small, vulnerable, even. It’s not that he wants to find a way to bolster his sense of self-worth by purchasing some sort of disguise, some shield of fabric that might endear him to Hannibal’s tastes so that when he’s uncertain

of everything else, he'll at least have that to ground him. It's not that, he tells himself. He's just being practical, is all.

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The first hint that they may be on the right tracks after all comes three days later, though not from the source Will wants. Worn thin by close quarters and a sense of hopelessness underpinning their every movement, Will's chosen to find the least pretentious looking bar he can. It's away from Matthew's increasingly petulant behaviour and it's a chance to purge the discreet nausea from the days of traipsing through the city; hours of the kind of shops and markets that offer immediate character appraisals based on the polish of a person's footwear or the price of their jacket. Neither Will nor Matthew had been made to feel particularly welcome and Matthew's never kind when he's being scrutinised.

So it's half ten and Will's sat on a leather padded stool, dodging eye contact from the other patrons at the bar and grateful that the staff here don't seem to require a tip after every round. Will counts no more than twenty occupied seats and a lot more empty ones. No one seems to be seeking conversation and there's an absence of English that makes drowning out other people just a measure easier.

Or it would, except some words carry the same horror in all languages, so when he hears the word 'mord' in its many variables, his ears can't help but listen more closely. It takes his brain a little longer to catch up when he hears the intonation of fear muttered between the group to his left – three men and one woman – but as their dread manifests in agitation and arguments, he's starting to feel like he's back in familiar territory, somehow.

He can pick out very little of the detail; it sounds like they're talking about a contest, or interview, that went desperately, violently wrong. He gathers that whatever they saw, they treated it as a warning. It sounds gruesome, and Will considers drowning the sound out, letting his head fill with something not murderous for just one evening. Except, this is more insight into a possible encounter with Hannibal than he's had since he got here. He finds himself ignoring the way his knuckles are whitening around his glass and instead listens more closely, dredging his memory for what little of the language he's retained.

It's not until he hears the repeated references to Schweinen that he starts to consider that he's misjudged the calibre of nemeses and that maybe, it's not Hannibal's trail he's sniffing out. Pigs are Mason's area.

He signals to the woman behind the bar for another whiskey and considers his options. If the people in the bar can lead him to Mason, then there's a chance Mason will lead him to Hannibal… if he could only find a more discreet way to scrape more useful information from them than picking words out of their panic.

It's been a while, he thinks, since he's tried to pickpocket anything, but if he can just find out a name, an organisation, even, then he's a step further ahead than he was yesterday. It takes one emptying and prompt refill of his whiskey before one of the men stands and heads down a narrow corridor leading to the bathroom. The man has a shake to his legs that tells Will he's not used to this kind of stress. Will puts his own drink down, makes no acknowledgement that he's aware of any other person in the bar, and gives an impression of drunkenness to his

walk as he gracelessly stumbles to the restroom; hands casually tapping the walls as though for balance.

The man is at the urinal, seemingly unable to piss and check his phone simultaneously, brow creviced with worry. Will stands two along from him and does a roll of his head, the kind of gesture adopted by irksome drunks with little concept of the unspoken codes of conduct where men's toilet habits are concerned. Will slurs an "aa'ight?" in the direction of the stranger, shakes himself off and spends too long washing and drying his hands.

The other man glares at him but there's no real direction to his anger. Will clocks the perspiration in his hairline, the lightness of breath and knows that this level of anxiety makes it easier to take advantage, but riskier if their fightback instincts kick in. He waits for the man to walk out and brushes past him. There's enough feigned clumsiness in his movements for it to seem like a sincere mistake – the man mutters under his breath in annoyance but Will, the stranger's phone now safely in his own pocket, mumbles apologies in English, and some hybrid of German and possibly Dutch. He's rounding the corner towards the bar, and the exit, when his hackles rise. There's an enforced quiet in the place which doesn't sit right.

The man is just ahead of him, inches between him and the wall separating them from the rest of the bar.

"Jaocb!"

The voice from the bar is loud, brash, with an American lilt and something else in its origin that Will can't place. The man in front of him edges back, knocking into Will and scrabbling back towards the washrooms. He shakes his head at Will and it looks like he's pleading – not to make a noise, not to give him away. Will nods. From the bar, there's a sound like glass banging against a table and a low murmur of nervous conversation – the sound of people pretending that everything's fine.

The bartender is saying something that Will can't hear but it's in the manner of one who has authority and steel nerves, but is adept at gauging when to back down.

Behind him, the tall man has successfully retraced his steps and is forcing his way out of the narrow bathroom window. Will's silently urging him to speed up so that he can head into the bar without drawing attention to the corridor and by extension, the escapee who he guesses is Jacob. It's not that Will feels he owes him anything, or that he particularly cares about his survival; it's just that if the people Jacob is scared of *are* Mason's men, Will would rather not offer them more advantage. He considers, briefly, that things like strategy, tact and care used to come easier to him.

"Where's Jacob?" comes the voice again – directed everywhere all at once. It would be refreshing to hear American being spoken in any other circumstance, thinks Will, wondering whether to follow the lead of the man now wriggling his legs through the minute space. *Almost clear*.

Of all the times to not bring a gun out with him, Will thinks he could have chosen a little more carefully.

“Jacob has left” says a female voice, the Germanic lilt to her accent barely audible.

A thud sounds gently from outside the washroom window. Will peers round the corner in time to catch the gaze of a six foot, brown haired woman with a pistol tucked into her loose black pants and her hair pulled so tight that her expression is held in place. He continues his pretence at being more drunk than he is and moves to his bar stool, the wilting curls of his hair shielding him from further eye contact. He pulls the stolen phone out and scans for messages. The tension in the room is palpable.

A man, medium height and with skin worn down by army sun, is gesticulating with his gun hand at the table Will had been eavesdropping on. He’s switching between a clumsy version of German and a ruder version of English, not leaving pause for the remaining three patrons to answer him. The tall woman, sleek eyes and hardened disinterest, is keeping look out. Somewhere in Will’s peripheral vision she seems to be staring at him periodically as he picks out a road name from the string of near indecipherable messages. No one else in the bar seems to want to move beyond nervous completion of their drinks. It doesn’t look like the kind of space that gets a lot of excitement and *goddamnit*, thinks Will, *this is why he chose it*.

“Drill, I understand…” says one of the men at the table, his English less fluidly spoken but compensated for with the confidence in diplomacy only ever expressed by those who aren’t used to firearms. “…He was going to be helping you. But as you see, he left quickly. He left his bag – “

The speaking man reaches under the table for what looks like a small black holdall and the man called Drill smacks his arm away from it with the back of his pistol.

“If you will let us find him –” continues the seated man, not deterred by the gun – as though his politeness and strength is protection enough.

“He’s the one supposed to do the finding” says Drill. “So either you help us join in the fight, Eddie…”

The man called Eddie narrows his eyes, looks to those around the table for support.

“…Or I snap his neck” he says, resting firm hands on the shoulders of the other man sat at the table. The man remains still, impassive, communicates some kind of plea for Eddie to go along with what he says.

“Ja, yes, of course. I can be…useful. Tell me about –“

“Not here” says Drill, hands lifting from the man’s shoulders. “Outside. Now.”

He clamps one hand around Eddie’s wrist, keeping his gun out and poorly aimed at the remaining two sat round the table. They do as the weapon tells them. There seems to be a collective exhale waiting to happen as Drill, Eddie and the pistol-carrying woman move as though to leave and even Will is calculating how much more whiskey it’ll take to soften his nerves after this. The strain of just sitting still on the stool is putting too much pressure on his stomach, all hunched over as he is.

Drill and Eddie walk ahead, Drill staring down the patrons with a tight-jawed grimace as if daring a single person to question *why* he has the power in this set up. The woman follows with more caution and murmurs something to Drill about Jacob, about how they should still try and find out where he got to. “Phone him” says Drill, hands pushing the door open and Eddie obediently walking through first. The tall woman has one hand on the door and the other on her mobile and Will’s attempt to silence the stolen device in his hands is a ring too slow.

Will’s breath stutters and he tries to cough, disguise the sound of the vibration and silence it without giving away his location, pass it off as coincidence.

The woman stands in the doorway, one hand to her ear and swivels her neck to catch Will dead in the eyes. *Shit*.

She’s back in the bar with a hand around Will’s wrist before he has a chance to run.

“That isn’t Jacob” shouts Drill, following her lead and Eddie trailing hesitantly behind.

“I know” replies the woman, pocketing the stolen phone and ignoring Will’s attempt to twist free from her grip. “Why do you have Jacob’s phone?” she asks Will. There’s an unshakable authority to her voice and a hint that the strength she’s using is fractional.

The other people in the bar are staring more freely, seemingly reassured that there is a clear target for the drama and that they, as witnesses, are incidental.

“Verstehen?” she shouts.

“I…picked it up in the bathroom” says Will, aware that this tells the woman nothing of what she needs to know. She responds by slamming an open hand into his neck. It’s sharp, winding, but not debilitating. She’s practised in this.

“I wanted to…” Will struggles for a convincing reason as to why he’d have the phone of their assumed turncoat and assesses his potential for an exit.

“…to learn about him” he offers limply. In the second it takes her to underestimate him, he’s twisted his arm free of her grip and manoeuvred himself off the bar stool and jammed his elbow into her neck, flooring her.

The bartender is shouting something unintelligible and Drill is grabbing Will’s arms from behind him. Photos are being snapped from camera phones and Eddie is hovering with the uncertainty of a man desperately hoping to prove himself worthy of safety in his new aggressive company. Will makes use of the leverage from Drill; he leans his body weight back against him and kicks his legs full into the woman’s chest as she rises from the ground. He stamps back down, catching her face but not drawing blood. Drill lets go of his arms and takes a retaliatory swing at his face, clocking him on the hard edge of his cheek. Eddie’s instincts are too hesitant to cause damage; Will kicks into his shins and upsets his balance for long enough to even his chances.

“It’s him” shouts the woman. She’s lunging towards Will and the other two are crowding him and his head is half full of whiskey tainted panic, and half full of the habits and patterns of all the minds he’s been inside. He’s calculating the angles and the impact as he drops down to ground level, grabs the bar stool by its legs and jams it up into Drill’s stomach, swinging it round into the woman’s shins and pulling Eddie to the floor and head-butting him squarely in the forehead. His stomach is searing in pain at the twisting but no one in the bar is going to weigh in on his side. He’s off the ground and pelting towards the exit, adrenaline sparking through his nerves as he rushes into the cool night air. His feet storm across tarmac, navigating the fastest route back to his hotel and the thickest shadows to hide in as he runs.

“He’s who Jacob was tracking” he hears in a breathless pant some yards behind him, partnered with the sounds of racing footfalls. “If we get him…”

Will rounds a corner, just far enough ahead to avoid being seen. It’s a residential street; the kind with tall buildings and stone steps leading to basement flats. It’s seconds before he’s crouched below pavement level, breathing slowed and quietened and heart pounding. There’s enough burn in his gut that he could cry – could *scream* – and he curses that his body is so used to nervous adrenaline that it doesn’t seem to use it to block out the sharper notes of nerve pain anymore.

“…We get paid a whole lot faster” he hears; the woman, balancing shouting and breathing with the heavy thunder of her footfalls. The voice follows a path away from Will, and the responses to her assertions from the two men fade into the sounds of late night traffic in the distance.

He’s safe. For now.

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By the time Will makes it back to the hotel room, topped up with tramadol and wretchedly exhausted, Matthew already knows the intricate details of the murder alluded to by the panicked bar patrons. “This is…beautiful” he tells Will, not questioning why the sweat drenched man is barrelling towards the shower room with a red flushed cheek and an expression like thunder.

“Look, come look” he says, waving Will over to his laptop. Will considers punching him, if only to let out some of the residual tension from the last hour. Instead, he tracks back from the bathroom and stands behind Matthew’s chair, staring at whatever has him enraptured.

The site he’s looking at makes Tattle Crime seem classy by comparison. Bold red font shouts words Will doesn’t recognise but it’s the picture that stands out. It’s been run through a filter to give the blood a vivid, near neon hue, and it looks like it was taken in a rush by someone who lacks Freddie’s eye for composition. The image shows a man’s bare torso, strung up on a meat-hook with a red brick backdrop. Where his legs should be, there’s a trail of what appears to be half chewed organs.

“It says here – the translation’s weird – but it says the pigs were still chomping at him when the police found him. It says he was probably alive for –”

“What’s his name?”

“Eh, Manfred something? I don’t think it matters. This is Mason, isn’t it?”

“Mason’s hardly in a state to do this” reminds Will. “But yeah, it’s his style. His *team*” he says, with a growing understanding of the people he ran from, that they were assembling additions to a crew and that Jacob was probably one of its recent deserters.

Matthew has a spark to his eyes that suggests adoration and Will is fiercely aware that the man’s allegiance is only as strong as his belief that it will carry him to greatness. Right now, Mason’s orchestration is a lot more impressive than any of Will’s unsuccessful searches through the city’s boutiques and there’s little more than convenience keeping him on his side. His use as a tool to remind Matthew of his own strength is set to expire rapidly in the presence of fresher competition. As Matthew murmurs on about the wonder of this apparently spectacular murder, Will considers his options. He could cut his losses now; let Matthew go – but as long as he’s in the position of hunter posed as bait, this sits contradictory to his reluctant self-preservation instinct.

He’s never been so good at strategy when he’s just being *himself*.

“What happened to your face?” asks Matthew, looking up from the screen for the first time since Will got back. “Is that a spot or something?”

“I found the men who made your spectacle there” he says.

Matthew looks interested in him at last.

“And?”

“And…”

There’s nothing he got out of the exchange earlier beyond a few good hits to the others, knowledge that Matthew already has, a road name and speeding up *their* attempts to locate *him*. It’s hardly the sort of success to brag about. Will finds himself wondering how Hannibal would approach the situation; right now, Hannibal seems to be the only player who’s in the lead and not being consistently hindered by those around him. He finds that the idea of stepping into his imagined headspace doesn’t repel him as much as it used to.

Hannibal would…Hannibal would have been nurturing co-dependency by now. Will considers that he may already have taken some steps in this area already.

Hannibal would take the focus away from himself; would puppeteer from the shadows He’d prove himself the more fearful force by example; lay tableaus of terror around the city out of pride alone, pull out hearts of any enemy just to show that he *could*. But first, first he’d make sure he took the control away from the other person.

Matthew's not got any lowered seizure thresholds to work with, no high pressured work to tempt him into dubious self-medication, or high strung neuroses. What he does have is a colossal ego and a pathological need to have his own sense of worth reconfirmed to him. Will scratches at his jaw and tries to wipe the thinking habits clean lest he becomes lost in them, safely away from his own swivelling moral compass.

What he has now are methods, theories, and a pragmatic approach for Matthew.

"…And, they have your picture" he tells Matthew. "Mason's people were looking for you."

Pride reaches Matthew before doubt.

"Why would they have mine?" he asks, though he sounds like he's hoping for validation of his reputation, however small it may be.

"There's money on your head" lies Will, hands massaging the back of Matthew's shoulders. "They didn't specify anything about you being alive for it."

Matthew licks his lips. There's a tremble in his limbs which doesn't feel like fear from where Will's standing.

"That doesn't – who knows about me?" asks Matthew and Will's almost bored at how easily he's buying into this.

"They seem to know we're here and we're looking, but yours is the face they've been told to look for. Not mine."

Matthew looks like sparking electricity. His hands reach up behind him, stroking at Will's forearms as though grasping a trophy.

"Where did you find them?" he asks. Typical that he'd want to rush in.

"I'll get to that." Will doesn't need Matthew to know that there's no way they'd bother to return to the same venue, or that he lost the phone he stole. He stretches his damp fingers down, laces them across Matthew's neck and presses lightly on his Adam's apple. If ever there was a way to prove the turning of tables, this is it. Plus, reasons Will, as he's finding himself in need of justification more often when it comes to Matthew and their proclivities, this seems as good a way as any to relieve the remnants of stress.

"Obviously, you could try and take them out, or dodge them" says Will, adding gentle pressure with each syllable, "but you're not entirely invincible, are you?"

He moves round and lifts Matthew up from the chair. He's a compact kind of heavy, firm and lithe and he moves to Will's prompts. Will's thinking about what Hannibal would do when he undoes each button of Matthew's shirt, methodical. It feels the way an autopsy might, peeling the first layer away. Matthew reaches to stroke Will's face like he's mistaken the slower pace for tenderness. Will lifts his hand away. "No. My turn" he says but he sounds like himself again and he's faltering.

Will's imagining Hannibal's hands guiding Matthew to his bed, grip firm and immovable. He's channelling the doctor as he places one hand on Matthew's chest and uses the other to tug the button of his pants open. "You should buy better trousers" he comments as the top button breaks from its stitching and flies across the room.

"What's *with* you?" asks Matthew.

"Your observational skills are slow" says Will in the patter of Hannibal's voice. He pulls Matthew's pants down, climbs on top of him and smiles. It's not one of Will's smiles. It's cold, serene, and unshakeable. Matthew looks nervous, and feels hard under Will's touch.

It's Hannibal's strength Will's using as he twists Matthew onto his stomach, reaches for the lotion by the bed, and as he wraps a condom on himself and hushes Matthew's confused protestations, he feels the reluctance of having to contain himself; imagines that every action and every delay is an exercise in self-restraint. He's hard, but it's a detached kind of reaction. Part biology, part feeling like he's holding onto the power of a *god*.

Ego, thinks Will, is an understatement.

As Matthew twists beneath him, Will embeds himself further in Hannibal's viewpoint. It's not about Matthew – not who he is – it's how he can bend the person, the breathing meat and opportunity beneath him – to his own will. He coaxes a moan out of him with fingers on the back of his head, leaning over him and breathing heat into Matthew's ears, his other hand rolling fingers down the shaft of Matthew's cock with not enough pressure for any kind of traction, not yet. It's about knowing that it's not a struggle for dominance; that his dominance is already implicit and that every act of uncertain compliance from Matthew is a victory for him. He pulls Matthew up by the hips, wets one hand with lotion and rolls a circle around his asshole.

"What are you *doing*?" asks Matthew and Will thinks that Matthew should probably have figured this out by now.

"Hush" he answers; imagines Hannibal's dextrous fingers pressing into him and mirrors the motion on Matthew.

"I've not – I don't –"

"You'll learn to" says Will, soothing, keeping his pressing and circling careful, like he's mastering a new instrument. Matthew's pushing back into the touch – simultaneously hesitant and needy. Nothing Will's borrowing from Hannibal's thoughts is about cruelty, not in the bluntest sense of the word. It's a careful manipulation of reactions and responses. It's proving capability, that he knows the undoing of a person and that this – this is how he can earn that person's trust. Or their acquiescence, at any rate.

Now, Will's thinking of Hannibal as he presses himself into Matthew, so carefully – so slowly that Matthew all but begs for more contact and *this is working*. As Will kneads the muscles around Matthew's hips, Matthew's kneading the sheets in tense little circles, folds of cloth catching between his fingers as his grip tightens, releases, tightens again. Will's only in as far as the tip and already there are expletives pouring out in rushed mutters.

“Shh” he says. “I’m just taking care of *you* this time.”

He pushes a fraction more, waits until he feels Matthew relax, and pushes further in. He’s caught between imagining Hannibal doing this, and imagining Hannibal doing this *to him*. He massages with his finger and pushes again, then eases back. The friction reverberates through him, warm and violent. He wonders why he waited so long to consider this vantage point for fucking, and how it feels like the first time he stood up for himself at home, the first time a girl kissed him and the first fight he ever won and he’s vaguely aware of being back in his own head and *this doesn’t feel right to him*.

“Fuck” shouts Matthew at the next shunt and Will pushes a pillow at him.

“Bite it” he tells him.

“What?”

“You’re making too much noise” says Will, except he’s saying it in clipped scolding tones and he’s not himself again.

He pushes in, right in this time and watches Matthew claw at the pillow, face half submerged in the white cover. He’s massaging his cock still, and it’s slicker and rigid. He could just dig a thumbnail in, right now, and undo Matthew completely. Drag a trail of blood up the length of him and pound at him until he went soft. He could smash the glass on the bedside table, use a shard of glass from it to cut slivers out of Matthew’s back, mark him with some permanence as some sort of reminder, some proof that he’d had ownership of this piece of flesh. Will compromises by biting into the taught skin of Matthew’s shoulder, inches above his bullet scar and considers how everything they’re doing right now seems terribly pedestrian. He’s imagining ripping a chunk from Matthew’s neck, spitting the blood out onto the white hotel walls and he’s thinking, as his hips catch a faster rhythm and Matthew warns that he’s getting close, that Hannibal’s thinking is not so safe a place to stay for so long. He’s curling his fingers into Matthew’s chest, pressing thin lines with his fingernails and Matthew’s swearing into the pillow.

Matthew comes as Will’s imagining slicing his chest open from behind, imagines the spill of insides flopping onto the bed. Will’s still fucking him, feels him uncoiling around him as he pictures Hannibal, *feels* Hannibal and how he’d fuck hard into him, wrap a hand around his throat and stop his airflow for just long enough to scare, long enough to prove that the balance of living and not living is in his grasp.

Will stops his own breath as he presses Matthew’s throat, feels the ghost of Hannibal’s fingers around his windpipe and the contraction from Matthew around him. It’s when Matthew starts clawing at his hand, trying to free his neck from Will’s grip, panicking, and Will’s teetering between possessing the ultimate kind of power, and being at its mercy. Even by letting Hannibal’s thoughts overlap his own, he’s more the subject, not the orchestrator. His breath is stuck in his own throat and what pushes him over, it’s not the reverberations of Matthew’s cough as Will lets his breathing back; it’s the unshakeable comprehension that his life, even as it is now, is entirely subject to Hannibal’s wishes.

He forces everything out of him – it's anger at himself, it's anxiety, it's catharsis and it's even less about Matthew than it ever was.

He pulls out, slow and with a residual shake in his limbs. A small kiss on Matthew's shoulder, over the reddened bite mark. Possessive, not affectionate.

He feels more like himself now, somehow. Detached from Matthew and immersed in self-congratulation for the strategic dismantling of his man underneath him. It's not cruelty, he reminds himself, shuffling towards the shower. It's *practicality*.

- -

# Convincing

Chapter Notes

> The chapter numbers on this are increasing as these updates are getting impossibly long and I'm trying to pace it a little better. That, and I still haven't written the last couple yet. Anyway! Here, have some plot.

The following day has less of an afterglow and more of a dim dawning of acceptance that Matthew is still not wholly convinced. He'd been talking excitedly through the closed door to the bathroom as Will made his terse update call to Kade. He'd cradled his laptop, all but salivating over new details from local news sites, and his eyes still had the nervy excitement that Will had attempted to fuck out of him the night before.

"Where do we find them?" he asks, knocking back his third cup of coffee.

Will's mind creeps back to the only useful information he'd picked out of the stolen phone.

"The people looking for you are working out of an address…" he says, taking the laptop from Matthew and pulling up street view map of the area. It's a residential street with mismatched architecture and a small grocery store on the corner. There's no way of telling which of the buildings is a potential base, or relevant to Mason, but it's *something*.

"It's on KIpsdorfer Strasse."

Matthew doesn't hide his disappointment at the lack of specificity. Disappointment is okay; it implies an expectation.

"You don't know where."

"It's a short street. We have… we have car rental to sort out and you could do with looking less like your mug shot. You have a hat?"

Matthew springs from the chair and pulls a grey shirt on, covering up the traces of pink scratch marks on his abdomen.

"You know I don't have a *hat*."

Will feels the absence of control like a sting across his skin. He's cranky, he knows, and working off a loose whim lacks the comforting precision of simple re-enactment. The nerves he's running on are constantly jarring against Matthew's incessant disapproval and blood lust and again, he finds himself missing the serenity of Hannibal. He doesn't feel guilty for it, this time.

“Then before we try a stake out, we need to shop” he says with practiced patience, resting a hand on Matthew’s shoulder in a way that suggests ownership, or an attempt to suggest it.

“And you need to stop fidgeting so much.”

- -

The rental car they’re in smells faintly of ashtray and dog. Will allows himself a moment to let the smell evoke nostalgia; for his sense memory to supply him with the simple happiness that a pack of strays used to provide him. It’s short lived; in the next moment he finds himself craving a cigarette if only to have a buffer between himself and the man noisily sipping coffee next to him.

“Is that one of them?” asks Matthew, pointing out of the right side of the car window at a distant shape crossing the street towards the corner shop.

It’s the third time he’s asked this about a stranger on the street, and the shape of the new movement is little more than a blur; but the gait is tall, precise, firm. It looks, from here, like the fighting woman from the night before.

“Hide your face” instructs Will, propagating the belief that Matthew is really the desired target. He climbs out of the car and hides his reaction to his tugging gut as he turns away. His knife is in one pocket of this trousers, his gun in another; some decorative pistol that a man recommended by Kade had been able to sell him at a tall price for very few questions. Will considers taking another round of painkillers before deciding that he’d rather have his pain-spiked wits than his relative comfort.

Will is three steps away from their stinking car when the same shape rounds the corner heading towards them, pouring change into her pockets and lighting up a cigarette. Will doubles back on himself; watches her in the reflection of wing mirrors as he pretends to look casual, invisible. From the shorter distance, he recognises the ponytail and taut expression. Definitely her. She stands for around five drags, the last a deep, lung-searing gasping breath, and stamps the cigarette out. She pats down the leather of her jacket, exhales with a grounding breath and turns on the heel of her boot to one of the houses. Will registers the entrance; chipped cement frontage, wilting ivy plant growing half way up the second floor window and a tinge of greyness offset by the maroon of the house next to it. He speeds towards the door – number 37 – and tries to hush the sound of his ragged breathing as he approaches It’d be easier, he thinks, just to wait; to pick the lock and creep in unannounced. The way Hannibal might. The door is swinging shut behind her and there’s a quarter second and maybe an inch that lets Will catch up and jam his foot in the gap.

“Fucking door” she mutters, shunting her body weight against it. It’s easy to take her off guard. Will shunts back, smacking the door into her and forcing himself inside the building. He kicks it closed behind him, grips her arm, twisting it behind her back. and wraps a sweating hand over her mouth.

“Shh shh shh.”

She stamps, crushes the tip of Will's toes in much the same way as a cigarette. He shouts, a caught noise that doesn't generate volume but betrays his fallibility.

"Shh" she spits behind his hand. She's ducking down, twisting herself out of the grip and Will's shoving her back into the wall, grabbing her ponytail and wiping the spittle from her mouth into her brittle hair.

"I really don't care if I hurt you or not" he says, shuddering slightly when he realises that he means it.

She laughs against the wall. "Me neither."

"I need to know why you're looking for me and who asked you to" he says, knowing the answer already. He needs a test run to know how likely she is to tell the truth.

"I like money" she answers simply. Will tugs at her hair and she snarls but doesn't shout.

"How much money?" asks Will, trying not to link his sense of self-worth with the money on his head.

"More than you'd offer me as a counter to stop. Which makes you coming here really, really stupid."

Will's already calculating whether the knife or the pistol would be the better option.

"Tell me who's bankrolling" he says, increasing the force of his pull.

"Tell me why you come here alone" she counters. "Do you have a wish for death?"

"Yes, but not necessarily my own."

By the time the last word is out, the woman has ducked her head down to waist level, dragging Will's wrist with the tail of hair, and her body swings round on itself to knock him backwards against the opposite wall of the corridor, the back of his head meeting it with a smack.

"You don't come to my house to threaten me" she says, taking full advantage of the way Will's tentative grasp of consciousness is wavering and pinning him to the carpeted floor. "You're here as a sacrifice. Now, bite."

The rest of her instruction is lost as Will blacks out.

- -

Will's vision smears into focus. He's in a cluttered, small flat and right ahead of him is a box shaped TV with some crackling visuals of a cartoon he doesn't recognise. He's not surprised to learn that he can't move his hands; he'd have done the same in her position. He tests the tension; feels his arms pulled too tight behind him and his wrists numbing steadily with twisted cable ties. It tells him that for all her fighting skill, the woman is an amateur.

There's cloth against his tongue and it's taut but not enough to silence or restrict breathing. From the angle of his butt on the floor and the proximity of his skin to a slow burning heat, he can tell that his pistol is no longer in his back pocket. He flexes his legs, tries to establish if the flick knife is still secreted in the front one. The bump is still there, wedged between his groin and thigh, with his phone just above it.

*Careless*.

His ankles are strapped together with the same ties as his wrists, arranged sharp in front of him. Now, if this had been him doing this, he wouldn't have done it that way. The angle gives him too much leverage. It's too easy for him to swing his legs up and kick someone in the shins; buckle them at the right angle to stamp down on their neck. His legs are hardly incapacitated, this way. He figures she's nervous. He keeps quiet; the longer she assumes he's unconscious, the more time he has to assess his surroundings. The house smells faintly ashy and this is good – it means she's nervous, prey to a habit and she can be distracted.

"Jamie" he hears from a male voice no more than a room away.

"Jamie, how long is he gonna take?"

The female voice answers, quieter and closer. "Half hour."

It's no great stretch to assume that the 'he' they're referring to is whichever of Mason's men has put the word out for Will, and that he'd probably be better off escaping his current situation as quickly as possible.

"Why so long, man? He's not bringing the cripple or something is he? He won't get up the stairs…"

Will had yet to consider the height of the room he was occupying. Multiple storeys could make it harder to plan an exit from the window. He's wondering if Matthew had thought to make a note of which address he'd got into and if Matthew would be likely to help him out of it if he found it. He thinks he'd rather work this one out on his own than find out just yet.

"From the river. He's working on the restaurant again" shouts Jamie. "He's always pissed when we interrupt him from that. We calling Eddie over for this?"

The man shouts out in the negative and this is good, thinks Will. This means there are only two of them here, for now.

He twists his wrists apart from each other, trying to strain the plastic tie enough to break it. The constriction is too much and the rustling noise is threatening to give him away.

"He awake yet?" shouts Drill. Jamie pads into the room, crouches in front of Will and tilts his head upwards. He flickers his eyelids, lets out a small groan into the fabric and feigns a weaker state of consciousness than he has.

"Barely" she shouts, coffee breath and the smell of ashtray clogging the air around them.

“I’m gonna stand outside a second” she shouts, pulling Will’s shoulder away from the radiator far enough to check that the ties are in place.

Drill makes a sound like disappointment but doesn’t offer to let her smoke indoors.

Somehow, the feeling that his life is pretty much over if he doesn’t get out of the cable ties doesn’t phase Will as much as he thinks it should. He waits for the footsteps to disappear, leans forward and twists again. The friction is rubbing the skin from his wrists but heat from the radiator has softened them and there’s some give. He strains some more, wrists tingling as the blood supply gets held back from his digits.

More footsteps. Drill, this time, dressed in army boots, khaki and black and faint nerviness permeating his movements. He wanders into the room and turns the TV off. Will keeps his eyes closed and mouth slack around the gag.

“You’d better be the one he’s after” he murmurs to Will. “Fuck knows how you got him so worked up.”

Drill crouches over Will’s legs and pulls his shirt half up, revealing the livid crimson line of his scar. The proof of his identification, Will supposes. Drill lets the fabric drop at the same moment that the heat from the radiator melts through the small section of the cable tie.

There’s no time to calculate this smartly.

Will jerks his legs up, smacking Drill in the groin. Before he has a chance to react, Will’s hands have grabbed Drill’s head and heaved it in a sharp swing into the radiator. Drill cries out and Will estimates that he has less than a minute until Jamie’s back in the house. He elbows Drill in the back of the neck, pulls his flick knife out of his pocket and cuts his ankles free, then his jaw. The knowledge of what he has to do; how to ensure his own safety and Matthew’s loyalty – it’s there like black oil in the front of his head, guiding his knife hand to Drill’s neck and, as Drill makes a sputtering protest, Will’s not even present as he drags the blade downwards, past the breastbone and wedging it firm in the indent beneath his stomach.

Drill’s death is not the purpose of this exercise.

The smell of blood thickens around him, hands coated and slick and sliding over the short knife handle.

Will’s not Will when he slices horizontal across Drill’s abdomen, pushing guts out of the way and wiping his hands on himself. He’s even further from himself when he pulls the phone from Drill’s pocket and wedges it between the folds of intestine, the quickest token to Hannibal’s drama that the circumstances will allow.

Footsteps stamp up the stairs and Will can feel himself returning as Jamie appears, refreshed from her smoke break.

“Leave now and you live” he tells her through gritted teeth, red sliding off him in ribbons, Drill lying splayed across the floor.

“Stay and…” Jamie understands. She reaches to her pocket and *oh god don’t have a gun* thinks Will, his route out of the window already forming. Her look of panic, disappointment and resignation tells him that she’s not a threat.

“Do not follow me” he tells her as she sprints down the stairs. “Stay away from the people who pay you.”

She’s almost out the door. “Run” he shouts and immediately regrets letting her go. The balance between nausea and bloodlust is sitting at odds inside his skin and he’s less clear on where his self is aligned within the turmoil.

To make the warning of Drill’s body more fitting, Will’s drawing on all those images that made Matthew swoon. The theatrics and the drama and the gore that sits nestled in the freely accessed alcoves of his mind.

As he hovers the knife above Drill’s warm body, he feels like he’s scribbling. Sketching out some rough notes of a design that isn’t his, waiting for the ideas to manifest as something more fitting. He doesn’t know about Drill, beyond his link to Mason. As far as any crimes he can call out in a tableau, there’s nothing here more than the junk of a flat with a handful of weapons and a lot more trash with no poetry behind it.

Hannibal, he thinks, could make something out of this.

He’s aware of time rushing through him, of the imminence of Mason’s other men, and of the need to have something to prove his mettle to Matthew. Something to prove to Hannibal who he is now.

One shaking breath later, and he’s digging the knife into the skin of Drill’s face, slicing the top layers of dermis away. He cuts at the other side, cheek first and pulling downwards. His knife sticks when he reaches the chin; Drill’s skin is tight and leathered and his knife needs sharpening. Will slices more; removes the lips in jagged chunks and hacks the bell of Drill’s nose off, resting it on Drill’s tongue.

In terms of ways to piss Mason off, he thinks, this will probably have the desired effect.

Blood rushes heavy in his ears at the scene of his making. The horror and the practicality combined have yet to form a rational response in his mind. It’s a statement; it’s self-preservation; it’s a warning, a taunt; it’s a gesture for Matthew; a calling card to Hannibal.

Somehow, the idea that Drill didn’t deserve it doesn’t permeate Will’s thoughts the way these things might have in the past. He pulls his phone from his pocket to take a photo, aware that the people looking for him are crossing the city towards him as he finishes up. He washes his hands in the tiny bathroom sink, pulls his shirt off, scrabbles through the junk in the place for his pistol and picks up a grey sweater from the room across the hall – he can’t tell if it belonged to Jamie or Drill, but the important detail is that it’s not blood soaked. His trousers stay as they are; the black fabric concealing any splatters.

A car engine sounds outside and Will gathers the last of his belongings; the knife, the gun, the shirt and the jacket pulled off him as he was dragged up the stairs; and heads to the back

of the house in search of a window to clamber out of.

The back of the kitchen reveals a fire exit; a tiny push-bar door leading to a corrugated metal spiral staircase with about half a meter between each footrest. It's adrenaline that carries him down the steps into the narrow alleyway below, hands sore and stomach roiling – and his foot hits solid ground as he hears shouted voices from the ground floor of the house. He's shaking as he runs – and he needs to *not* run, can feel the way the muscles of his gut feel like they're tearing fresh each time – but it takes him no more than three minutes to traverse the distance of the alleyway and double back round onto the street where Matthew's parked.

Matthew's covered in a thin glimmer of sweat when Will reaches the car.

"You get anything out of them?" he asks as Will launches into the passenger seat.

"Plenty – get us out of here."

"Why'd you let the woman go?" he asks, disappointment and condescension colouring his words as the engine remains stubbornly silent.

Will pulls his phone out of his pocket with blood on his hands that his brief washing didn't shift.

"You saw her run" he says. "She was the messenger. I dealt with the other one" he says, showing Matthew the picture of Drill's lack of face.

"This was you?" he asks?

"Drive"

"Why the rush? You've *dealt* with him."

Will leans across Matthew and turns the key in the ignition.

"Drive."

Matthew passes the phone back to Will and puts his hands on the wheel.

"Look, you *saw* the men who turned up as I was leaving. These are the ones we'll need to plan for."

The car glides forward, towards the building Will had just run from.

"Head down" he hisses to Matthew.

Matthew rubbernecks as they pass the house, men scattered like roaches, all shouting and confusion. One of them looks – in passing – like the security at the Verger estate – the tall one, Roscoe; and he finds the idea that Mason's brought his closest men out with him somewhat reassuring. He must be close.

Will smiles.

“Aren’t we following them?” asks Matthew, eager and reckless as ever.

“Not now. They need time to sweat.”

Will looks at Matthew, tries to gauge whether he understands.

“Matthew…”

The younger man looks from the road to Will, smile toying at his lips.

“…Matthew, is that blood on your cuffs?”

Matthew’s grin channels the devil’s mirth.

“I figured she wasn’t running fast enough.”

- -

# Reckless

Chapter Notes

> Editing woes strike again; this chapter is obscenely long but wholly necessary.
> Thank you for the excellent comments and encouragement - the narrative is well along its hellpath now...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes Will most of the afternoon to scour the names of restaurants by the river Elbe within a 30 minute drive of the morning's location. Between poorly translated articles about buyouts, names of business entrepreneurs and sketchy images from Google street view, there are two potential locations that may be holding Mason's crew. Both properties have been bought within the last two months but neither has the name Verger associated with it.

"You still don't know where to go?" says Matthew.

He's still got blood under his fingernails and has been sniffing them periodically since they got back to the hotel room. He'd only got rid of his bloodstained clothes when Will had physically plied them from him, soaked them in toilet bleach and wrapped them in multiple plastic bags. The shower that followed – Will's shower, at first, until Matthew had followed him into the small cubicle, buoyed by murderous energy – had done little to help Will feel cleansed. The smells, of them, the blood divvied between them, hotel soap and Matthew's come – clings to the air in the room. Matthew sniffs again and looms over Will's shoulders.

"It's one of these two" says Will, tired in more ways than he can name. He scratches addresses into a notepad and pushes the laptop away from him, pulling a sheet of tramadol and a fresh strip of dihydrocodeine out of his pocket. "I need to rest before we do anything."

"You're annoyed that I killed her" says Matthew.

"No" says Will. He means it, too. Honestly, he's relieved.

He lacked the instinct to wrest life out of more than what was essential for his own survival, but the trail left by the pair of them will bring more attention and risk than his actions alone would have done.

"You needed that, and it's why you're here, with me" he tells Matthew, slipping his shirt off, stepping out of his pants and under the sheets of his bed. He makes it sound like something he's gifted to the man, like a live mouse fed to a snake.

"You need to eat with those" says Matthew, gesturing to the sheets of tablets in Will's hand. "And drink. Swallow them dry too much and you'll burn your throat raw."

“Are you telling me this because you care, or because you want to show that you know how meds work?” asks Will, popping two pills from each sheet and swallowing them without water.

Matthew walks to the mini fridge, pulls out a wrapped cheese and throws it at Will.

“You’re gonna be no good at taking out however many men if you’re bent double from cramps” he offers as an answer.

Will grudgingly peels the wrapper off the cheese. “Obviously that would never have been a problem until –”

“She had no idea who I was.”

Will stops, the plasticy wedge barely past his teeth.

He knows what this means.

“You said they were looking for *me*. And she was one of the people looking. So…”

“Your reluctance to trust me is becoming aggravating” says Will.

“I’m just – I need to *know* –”

Will sees the betrayal in Matthew’s face and it’s an echo of something he knows intimately.

“The likeness they were working off wasn’t as close as you imagine” says Will, swallowing the cheese and half wishing he could choke on it to get out of the lies he needs to construct.

“Why’d you tell me that? You’re an awful liar, Mr Graham.”

Will feigns humility. “Because… because you wanted an opportunity to do what you do best” he offers, soothing. “You wanted to wrench screams from their throats, to tug skin off their bones and get ever stronger for it” he whispers like the start of a lullaby. “And you weren’t going to get to do that if you’d gone chasing them on your own. *We* weren’t going to do that.”

Matthew looks mildly appeased but sets his attention to the screen in front of him. His shoulders are tense and his fingers skim the keyboard in jittering bursts.

“The thing is, Matthew…”

Matthew glares. He knows Will only addresses him by name as a way of asserting himself.

“Oh, tell me, *Will*.”

Will leans on his elbow, feels the first wave of numbness from the painkillers rising inside him.

“We’re close to finding them, thanks to you, but we’re even closer to *him* – to Hannibal – finding us.”

“You wanted me to think that you killed that man to protect me.”

“There’s more than one endgame here” says Will. “But rushing in blindly is a fool’s move. You’re not a fool, are you?”

Matthew stares at the laptop and Will holds his tongue.

“Nice of you to play me like one.”

Will wonders if he’s been rehearsing for moments like these, moments when his misplaced actions form ugly repercussions and the opportunity to resolve them without bloodshed.

“I’m sorry” he says, filling with fog and not meaning the words for Matthew.

The sound of tapping keys skitters through the air until Matthew sees fit to speak again.

“There’s not been anything on Tattle Crime on him for days” says Matthew wistfully.

“That’s because Freddie’s in the states, and he’s over here.” Will’s voice is thickening and he’s sliding further down the bed. “When the next story hits we’ll be embedded in it, I guarantee it.”

“There’s no one to take his mantle” muses Matthew, skipping through his bookmarks and running translations on news sites.

“He’s still holding it, is why” says Will, eyes closed.

“Your kill’s made it to the homepage of MordWelt” announces Matthew. “It’s a better photo than the one you took.”

Will doesn’t open his eyes to look.

“Yours with it?” Will asks, wondering if this is the kind of conversations married couples have before bed. Pleasantries shared about the day’s achievements.

“It’s one of the links” he says, faintly crestfallen. “But it’s big. I reckon Freddie’ll have it on her site by morning.”

“Good” murmurs Will.

He’ll see it, then.

- -

The medicated fog that permeates through Will’s sleep does little to obscure the swelling terror of his nightmares. Tonight, he finds himself in the centre of a cell. It’s got high grey walls and drainage slats in the ground and it’s not unlike a gas chamber. Mason’s there, in one corner, standing, and this is how Will knows he’s dreaming. His subconscious is kinder

to his enemies than to himself. In the corner to his left is Matthew, and in front of him, blood streaming steadily to the drainage in the floor, is Drill's decomposing body.

"It's a poor copy" says Mason through the remains of his face, wounds still as raw as the day he made them.

"You shouldn't believe it" he tells Matthew. "It's lying to you. *He's* lying. You never had time for liars, did you, Mr Brown?"

Will finds himself backing away, standing in his own corner of the square cell. Making room for Mason's laughter as it clogs the room.

Matthew studies the body, studies Mason. "Neither of you is who I want anyway" he says, arms folded across his chest. "You're just ladder rungs."

Will tries to speak – tries to impart reason and warnings that Mason lies too, that Mason doesn't care at all and will only fold Matthew into the body of lackeys working for no recognition. His voice sits like a choking bird in his throat and refuses to spit out the words.

"Think… of where the power is" says Mason, the wall dissolving behind him and shapes of strangers, a small army, materialising in shadows around him. "The money. The tools. You're scooting around in someone's pocket – let me show you *wealth*."
Drill's body appears to be disintegrating, the vivid reds sinking into muted hues of unsaturated terracotta, into grey, into bland and unremarkable.

"I've seen what you're capable of, Matthew" says Mason and the sway of faceless shapes behind him seem to murmur in agreement.

Will moves towards Matthew, pleads with his eyes. *Don't listen to him*. He knows it's pointless. He puts his hand on Matthew's shoulder, stroking short rotations and it's desperate, cloying. Mason stares and Will feels undone by it.

"If *that's* all that's keeping you pinned to this guy…"

Mason's laughing at his own voice, at the ridiculousness of Will's pleas.

"Come here, Matthew" he says. "Come find a *challenge*."
*He'll destroy you*, thinks Will, words gagging in his throat. *He'll discard you as soon as it's convenient*. *Before* then, even, just because he *can*. *This isn't the glory you need*.

Matthew moves across the cell and Will's trying to hold on to him, trying to pull him back. He's doing it for Matthew, or maybe just for himself. The same selfish reasoning that keeps him making the same mistakes.

"You lied" says Matthew simply, shrugging off Will's grip.

Mason reaches a hand out to Matthew; firm and welcoming.

*Don't*.

Will lunges to stop him, feels the swelling sense of dread as Matthew turns his back on him, and his voice stays stuck.

“You shouldn’t have lied, Mr Graham” Matthew says, stepping into Mason’s grasp. The shadow figures around him swarm, pulling at his limbs and tugging at him, pulling pieces out of him the way Mason’s pigs would. Matthew doesn’t scream; just watches the pieces of him disappearing into the shadows. He turns, facing Will and sputters red; no words, just that same expression of betrayal.

*I warned you.*

Will wakes to Matthew’s hand on his forehead. It’s clammy. It still smells faintly of blood.

“Warned who of what?” he asks, not sounding wholly interested in the answer. The words spill out in his orderly voice; soothing, reassuring and distant. Nothing like the snap-wired Matthew of his dream.

Will lets his vision shift into focus. Wraps his left hand around his right wrist as a way of grounding himself in the present and asserting his physical presence. It’s an easier ritual than drawing any clocks or speaking his own name, and it comes with fewer resentments.

“I know you want better than I’m offering” he tells Matthew through dry lips. “But don’t trust…him.”

“Go back to sleep.”

The next morning sees Tattle Crime boldly proclaiming the resurrection of the Chesapeake Ripper in Germany. Will looks at the picture of Drill’s corpse, his artless message, and reads the collection of hyperbolic speculations about the crime. Freddie presents no suggestion that the mutilation could have been the work of anyone but the ripper, and by extension, Hannibal. Will scans the words as his coffee grows cold and wonders if she’s guessed it was him.

“When are we heading to the restaurant?”

Matthew’s voice is obscured by the shower and Will’s grateful that he’s finally getting the blood out of the tighter crevices of his skin.

“Nothing ‘til late afternoon” replies Will as his phone starts vibrating on the table.

He lowers his voice and faces away from the bathroom.

“Kade.”

“I assume you were in the vicinity of last night’s event” says the speaker. There’s a background drone of rustling paper and nearby traffic and even with Kade’s metallic voice, it’s enough to make Will feel something like homesickness.

“I just read about it” he says, and it’s not entirely a lie.

“If he’s killing again there’ll be a torrent of shit heading in everyone’s directions and unless you’re there to contain it, you’ll be the one to bear the full brunt of all of it.” It’s spoken through gritted teeth and it reminds Will of frustrated teaching staff, of a mother who had no control over the morbid curiosities of her son, of people who understood aggression but not how to wield it.

“That’s one hell of a metaphor” he tells her.

“You’re there to catch him. Lay a trap. Put yourself at the centre of it if you have to, but I gather Mason’s in the area.”

Seconds pass and Will appreciates that Kade’s motives are more entwined with the Verger’s hold over all available power than he first thought.

“That didn’t go so –”

“But for god’s sake” she interrupts, “make sure someone catches him in the act before this turns into more of a charade.”

“Yeah. I’ll be sure to not let him kill me *all the way*.”
The pause before she replies is longer than just the time delay of the phone line.

“You’re damn lucky, Mr Graham, that you’ve got the freedom to try and set things right from where you are…”

As if anything being set right is an option anymore.

“You’ve got the tools. You’ve got the names of the police staff to contact. You’ve got another back-payment of wages to tide you over but don’t – don’t let me read about another one of his kills without an arrest or so help me I will fly out there to bring you back myself.”

Will bites back a multitude of responses he’d like to level at the seething voice on the phone. He takes a heavy breath and opts for the only one that won’t incur the full pelt of her fury.

“I have a few leads. We’re – I’m – making progress.”

“Make it faster.”

The call ends with a satisfying clunk of a handset being slammed.

Kade doesn’t even suspect that it’s not Hannibal’s work she’s reading about. It’s not just Freddie’s bias that’s guiding her opinion, surely. She’d seemed unquestioningly convinced that the mutilated body was the Ripper’s trademark, and Will wonders if he’s been wearing Hannibal’s mask for so long that it’s stuck to him, now. That he’s a warrior trapped inside the wrong armour.

The awareness twists inside him, pulls at his insides and he’s sure a part of himself fell out with his guts that night, and that whatever’s growing in its place is more than dirt. It’s toxic. It’s molding him into something more like a mirror than a person; a black mirror, reflecting the worst of humanity back at itself, highlighting only the wretched and the rotten parts.

- -

“Why’d Mason decide to open a *restaurant*?” asks Matthew from the passenger seat. They’re in a different rental car today; different model, different company, different aliases used. Matthew is angled faintly towards the window, arms folded away from anywhere Will might brush them if he reaches for the clutch. He’s still smarting.

Why wouldn’t he? It’s smarter than anything they’ve managed since they got here. Will refrains from saying anything that may further endear Mason to Matthew.

“Because he’s being entrepreneurial about his attempts to bait Hannibal.”

Matthew smiles at the name.

“And because Mason’s drawn to the vulgarity of extravagance, he thinks that Hannibal will be too. He’s hoping that Hannibal’s appetite will draw him out.”

“Will it?”

“I think it’s too obvious for Hannibal. If it works, it’ll be because Hannibal wants him to think it’s worked.”

“You’d know.”

Will drives in silence, navigating the wide roads and shutting his thoughts down to the slowly encroaching sense of something more insidious than simple fear. His pistol sits heavy at the back of his belt, his knives – two more, since last time – rest in the folds of fabric of his trousers, his shirt and one tucked into his socks. In case.

“How do we know which restaurant it is?” Matthew asks the window. He looks strangely childlike, this way. Impertinent. Precocious.

“Instinct.”

By which Will means that the press release about a restaurant specialising in pork based feasts, with more extravagant names for the planned dishes than the translate function could deal with, was the more likely lure.

“Besides,” he reasons, “the one we’re heading to has its opening tomorrow. The other’s in two weeks. If I’m wrong, we’ll have plenty of time to sound the other one out.”

“You didn’t just stand in the street and let your…thing you do…figure it out for you?” asks Matthew, no small amount of condescension in his voice. More proof that he’s bored of all the things Will can offer him. A novelty worn out.

“That’s not…” Will starts, and lets his voice tail off.

Will pulls into a turning under a bridge, into a small cafeteria car park next to the water.

“You’re kidding? This is the place?”

It's not the place. The cafeteria looks like well worn trash – the kind of place to appease tourists in need of a cheap rest break and snack between their cultural tour of the city's sights.

"It's as close as we can get to it without parking up in front of a closed property" he explains, frustrated at Matthew's inability to either trust him or use his imagination.

"Besides, I need a coffee that's not instant and we've got a long evening of skulking in the shadows ahead of us."

Matthew slams the car door shut behind him with more force than necessary and walks ahead, shoulders swinging more than his frame warrants. Will takes a heavy breath and ekes it out slowly through his mouth before following him, slower and aware of the receding benefits of his pain meds.

Matthew's already being served when Will gets inside.

"Zwei Kafe, bitte" he tells the girl at the counter in an accent that's pure American. She responds in fast German, questions about the type of coffee or the milk or the temperature or who knows what. Matthew looks bemused, stunned briefly into silence.

"Do you want it with skimmed milk, full fat,  foamed milk, cream, chocolate sprinkles, and would you like it to take away or to drink here?" she asks in note-perfect English.

"Black, in a takeaway cup please. Thanks" intervenes Will.

The serving girl looks pleased with herself and Matthew looks pissed. Small victories, thinks Will.

They're scanning the faces of the people in the place for anyone that bears familiarity, anyone who looks like a hired thug on a quick coffee and schnitzel break. No one stands out, and they carry their drinks outside to where the sinking light is scattering purple reflections on the surface of the river.

It's beautiful, somehow, even with the cold wind wrapping around them and the inevitability of what has to transpire between them, if not now, then eventually.

"The place is about a hundred yards past the next bridge" says Will. "There's a handful of greenery around it, and it's right by a tunnel, so it should be easy to stay hidden."

"We're not going in though."

"No. But if they're set to open tomorrow there'll be movement there. We'll know if it's them and we'll know how –"
"I hardly see why you needed to drag me out here to window shop."

"If it's that simple, then yes, you would be better off back in the hotel room fantasising about your next kill…"
Matthew starts walking.

He supposes that the strain of close quarters, of pain and withdrawal and of debilitating doubt has taken its toll on his politeness. He follows.

“Slow down, will you?”

Matthew spins on his heel.

“Everything’s slow with you. *Everything*. We’re in breathing distance of them and they’re not even the right people, and you still wanna –“

“Keep your voice down.”

Will catches him up, breath labouring in his chest.

“Impetuousness won’t find him –“

“Everything’s so *cautious* with you. You’re not calculating, you’re not like *him*. You’re just lost.”

Will wraps a hand around Matthew’s arm, pulling him so their eyes meet. His words come out through gritted teeth.

“I’m doing this in a way that won’t get us *killed*.”

Matthew pulls his arm free. He looks more hurt than angry, but his words are spilling out all the same.

“I don’t think you want to do this at all. I think you want to avoid finding him –“

“What?”

“– because you’re hoping that someone else is gonna intervene and kill you to save you from having to face anything *he’ll* do to you.”

Hands shoved in pockets, Matthew turns and continues to the site of the restaurant.

“Wait.”

Matthew slows, barely, as Will follows.

“I’m not trying to stop us.”

It sounds desperate.

“I’m just…I’m worried that you underestimate what Mason’s people are capable of… and I don’t want you – or us, getting killed before we get what we came here for.”

The words are staggered by ragged breathing and as they walk, Matthew twelve paces ahead, the lights of the restaurant come into view like glowing orange cubes behind a small parking lot.

“Matthew” he hisses, aware of the proximity to people who might hear. There are four vehicles of varying size in front of the red brick building, which suggests more people present than either of them could deal with on a good day.

“*Matt*hew.”

The figure of the younger man sprints away, round the corner toward the back of the venue.

*Fuck*.

The ground under Will’s feet is cold through the soles of his shoes. He follows Matthew’s path, keeping close to the small shield of trees around the building. Light sifts through onto the tarmac from the window, interrupted by silhouettes of people shifting through what appears to be the kitchen. Will stays still, tries to hear conversation, clues as to whether the people in there are the people he expects, or whether it’s just some random business folk preparing for a regular opening.

There are sounds of liquids being poured into glasses, of at least three different accents, but nothing clearer than that.

Then there’s the snap. The sound of a brittle twig being snapped underfoot, a handful of yards from where Will stands.

Matthew’s eyes glint from the source of the noise. Will looks to him, pleading, silently. He shakes his head and Matthew smiles in that dangerous way.

Someone from inside calls to announce that they’re going for a smoke and the American accent is all the confirmation Will – and Matthew – need.

*Don’t*.

A short man emerges from the back door, stands by the bins and rummages in his pocket for a lighter. He’s all of eight feet from where Matthew’s standing, submerged in shadows. As the flame from the lighter hovers under his chin, Will recognises the weathered face as Feverria.

“I’ve got something you might want” says Matthew softly. Feverria jumps, almost drops his smoke but keeps it balanced in the corner of his mouth.

Will shifts a step further back into the shadows.

“The fuck are you?” asks Feverria round the cigarette, hands reaching for his pocket and pulling a knife out. He brandishes it as Matthew stalks closer. No one inside seems to have noticed the disturbance.

“I know who you’re looking for” says Matthew, voice low and confident. Will feels a drop in his gut like stitches being pulled out. “And he’s much closer than you realise.”

“And you’re not him” says the shorter man, spitting out his cigarette. The speed with which he deploys the knife, two inches above Matthew’s knee, pushing him down before he has a

chance to reach for his own weapon; Will knows this speed. He's felt its heavy impact before. There's a foot on Matthew's stomach pushing air out of him before he can make a sound and in the next moment, he's being pulled upright by the back of his jacket. Inside has grown quiet.

Matthew stares through the shadows, looking to Will for help, pleading as he scrabbles to stem the flow of blood from his thigh. It might be enough to get him out of there, get Matthew safe, if Will jumped in now. Stuck a knife in Feverria's throat and ran.

Will remains still.

"If you're interrupting tonight for anything less than a head on a plate," Feverria tells Matthew as he grips his hands behind him, "the next one's on the inside."

Feverria kicks the back door open, pushing Matthew through.

The last word Will hears from Matthew is "magpie", a wounded, breathy admonishment.

That's when a sheath of black cloth drops in front of his eyes, tightens at his neck, and a heavy grip pulls him backward through the trees.

Chapter End Notes

Updates will happen every few days. Comments and kudos are better than tramadol...

http://muffichka.tumblr.com/

# Choice

Chapter Notes

> Finally - an update of a sensible length!
> Your feedback is more motivating than I know how to express, so thank you - so much - for reading, you excellent humans.

"Will."

The timbre of the voice pulls Will so softly back to consciousness that he's not wholly sure that he's awake. He opens his eyes and no light enters.

The black fabric.

The hands.

The feel of something like a noose around his neck that's still resting too close to his skin for him not to feel like he's on trial, somehow. Or awaiting execution. His arms are behind him and the seat he's on feels warm, padded, wide – like the back seat of a car.

"Will, I trust you're with me now."

For all the time that's passed since Will last heard Hannibal's voice, its familiarity is immediate.

"Hannibal, I'm –"

"Shh. Now is not the time for those words. Your associate has been with Mason's people for eighteen minutes now, and while I imagine they will have kept him alive, I do not believe the situation will be comfortable for him."

There are so many words Will wants to say. To not be able to see him, to touch, even, to know that he's *real* right now tears at him fresh.

"Why did you –"

"I must apologise for interrupting you, Will, but what you must face now is not rooted in questions about any past, but in the future you choose, and time is pressing…"

*Then speak in short sentences, you pretentious* fuck thinks Will, his anger reassuring and ungrounding him simultaneously. It's too easy to fall into the lull of Hannibal's voice, to defer.

“…So your options are these. Your only ally has just entered a den of wolves and his last impression of you is that you betrayed him when you could easily have helped – “

“He was going to turn me over to them” says Will, the cloth obscuring his words.

“And I trust you will appreciate no small measure of irony in this when you later have time for reflection. But consider that he had little option but to offer them something to spare himself, and that he has been your friend, and that you have an opportunity to remedy this. It is a small misdeed you dealt him, and can be undone.”

Sweat gathers inside the cloth and Will tenses the bonds on his wrists. The duplicitous inferences of Hannibal’s words are heavy and suffocating.

“So. You can cling to your betrayal. Let go of him, and trust that if Mason’s men do not kill him, that he will be too slow to catch and destroy you in return. You can leave this car, work free of your bindings, contact your people at the FBI and tell them that you found me but that you let me go. And you will never see me again.”

“Or you could end it all now” Will offers, sounding almost hopeful at the idea of his own death.

There’s a shift of the seat and Will is imagining Hannibal debating the option.

“You misjudge me.”

He sounds irritated.

“Alternatively," continues Hannibal, his voice unobtrusively commanding, "you come with me. You leave your phone, you leave Matthew Brown, we leave this city together and disappear as we once planned to. All of us. Though you understand that trust would be no small thing for you to earn, this time.”

Will swallows down a thought of Abigail and reminds himself that she’s dead. That there is no daughter, and nothing Hannibal lures him with will compensate for her absence from the world.

“Matthew has been in their hands for twenty one minutes now. Your final option will provide you with a chance to appease your conscience. And to address Mason’s growing bloodlust, which I suspect will not cease until he has found the both of us.”

“How.”

“I cut you free, send you to the wolves and allow you the chance to save your companion. You are probably aware that Mason is in there with them. You give Mason what he wants, and in so doing you allow yourself the chance to choose which side of the beam on which you are perched you will jump from.”

Will pushes out a breath. Already, Hannibal’s voice is so wrapped around his thoughts that it’s impossible to decipher where his own sit in the folds. This option…this would have been

Kade's plan – the removal of Mason and the capture of the one to kill him. Except this way, Will would be taking Hannibal's place.

Each plan sounds like suicide set to a different pace. His conscience is moot; it's about choosing the fastest way out.

"Let me go after them."

"Good."

A hand reaches into his trouser pocket and Will immediately hates the sounds of panicked surprise that escapes him.

"Your phone" Hannibal explains.

He quietens enough to hear a second person breathing in the vehicle, quickly obscured by the sound of the door on Hannibal's side opening and closing.

A second later and he's met with crisp air and Hannibal's hands on his arms, guiding him steadily from the car. The door shuts behind him and with a brief tug, the tension goes from his arms as his wrists are freed. He reaches to check the presence of his gun and his knives before considering that he should have reached for Hannibal; proved that it's really him and not a synthesised voice made to goad him into a well executed trap.

Another tug at the back of his neck – enough to halt his breath for a full second – and then the cloth on his head loosens enough for him to pull it off.

"You should hurry" says Hannibal, and his face is real, all of him – he looks underdressed, ordinary, even, with the streetlight cutting across his face in chiaroscuro. The car behind him has darkened windows and no indication as to who sits in the driver's seat.

"Go, Will. I will find you when your choices have been made. I can only hope on your behalf that they are true ones. "

# Slice

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry.

There's a tall, square-jawed woman by the back door of the restaurant. Will manoeuvres through the trees as quietly as he can manage; apparently they've heeded Matthew's warning that he didn't come alone and the woman looks alert.

A gunshot would send anyone inside running towards the commotion. A knife would involve getting up close. And running no longer feels like an option, practicality and guilt aside.

He doesn't know her. She doesn't deserve intimacy. It's survival.

Voices from inside the building offer loosely audible arguments and Matthew's voice carries over them. He's shouting that he *can* or he *can't* – it's not clear. Will feels a small reassurance that he's alive, just as Hannibal said he would be. There's no corresponding assurance that the sounds afford his sense of self-preservation.

At the moment that the woman by the door sees the glint of the pistol, the shot's already left the gun and lands hot in her neck. It's a quick death; unfortunate but a practical necessity.

Inside grows quiet and Will ducks behind the bins. There could be any number of people in there and the only three he knows of for definite are Matthew, Feverria, and Mason.

At least two of those men want to kill him.

Two sets of footsteps pound towards the back door where the woman's body is splayed.

"They got Bellis" shouts one of the men – tall, Nordic-looking – Will recognises him from the bar as Eddie. The new guy. The second man to follow him outside is Roscoe, the other gatekeeper from his last visit to the Verger estate. Both men have strength on their side.

Will aims the pistol at Roscoe, hand steady and vision clear enough from between the two large waste bins.

It's like a game, this way. There's no engagement. He pulls the trigger back; such a small gesture for such a terminal outcome.

And nothing

The trigger jams, and two more useless pulls at it have given his location away. Roscoe walks towards the bins, gun hand held high, while Eddie, oblivious, heads towards the trees,

crouching and darting like he's only learnt how to do this kind of thing from watching films.

One heavy shove from Will sends the bin careening into Roscoe, flooring him. Eddie spins round as Will tries again to shoot; this time, a shot flies from the barrel. The light's too weak to tell where he hit but the scream Eddie lets out is fierce. One working shot in four is bad odds to be working with and the betrayal of his backstreet firearm leaves him feeling vulnerable. It's no better to him now than a glorified prop.

Will's inside before Roscoe is upright again, door slamming behind him.

When he rounds the corner, he's expecting the warm welcome that greets him from the steel furnished kitchen. Feverria lunges, his own gun flat against the palm of his hand. Disarming him is almost easy; Will kicks his knees sideways and as he folds to the tiled floor, he stamps on the wrist of his gun hand, splaying the fingers enough for him to kick the weapon under a shelf loaded with steel pans. The short man lands a ringed fist on Will's left shin and grips onto his legs as a way of dragging himself upright. It takes one misjudged punch toward the side of Feverria's head for the man to duck back down, tugging the broken pistol out of Will's grip with his injured hand and knocking it to the ground. Kicking it out of the shorter man's reach, Will pulls him up by the hair and uppercuts him, sending his head backward into the cooker rig. He's still.

"Thanks, for joining us."

It's Mason's metallic voice reaching over the echo of banging, and ending him here, right now, would seem almost anticlimactic. There's no debt to Margot in terms of legacy, not anymore. There's nothing but the hatred, the need to protect himself, and the need to show Hannibal what he's become.

And between them, there's Matthew.

Matthew, sickly pale, sweating and with a swelling pink protrusion on his cheek, is staring at Will with an unreadable expression. He doesn't look like he expects to be saved. His arms are twisted behind him and fixed to the leg of a steel food prep table with electrical tape and there's a collection of red spatters at his feet from the wound on his leg. Will moves so he's stood behind him, his back to the wall so he's ready for when Roscoe or Eddie return. From this angle, he can see the scuff marks on Matthew's knuckles, and Will's wondering how much Matthew helped weaken Mason's party before he arrived.

"I'd prefer it if you didn't make too much of a mess. Got our opening tomorrow, you see. I'm running low on staff who can help with the clean-up thanks to you and murder twink here, and you've just knocked out the new owner."

Will finds he has nothing to say to Mason. Anything he offers will only add to Mason's need for theatrics and he just wants this over with. The length of time it's taking for Roscoe or Eddie to reappear is putting him on edge.

"Told you he was near" says Matthew, pink spittle flying from his mouth as he speaks.

Will slips the knife from his pocket, checks that the entrance he came from is still clear and that no one is visible behind the doorway Mason is blocking in his chair. It's two short, crouched steps to where Matthew's stood and he presses the knife against Matthew's back.

"You don't want to do that, Mr Graham" states Mason. Matthew twists to look at him and this time his expression shows panic.

"*He's* out there" whispers Will into Matthew's ear. "We can end this here, now, the two of us."

"It's rude to whisper" says Mason, "and I don't think he believes anything you say, do you, Mr Brown?"

"You think I won't end you?" asks Matthew and it's not clear who he's addressing, but there's so little conviction in the way he says it. The knife cuts down through the tape. Matthew stares like he doesn't know if he's supposed to thank Will or cut him.

"There's still two outside" he says and Matthew runs – slower, with his injured leg, but still faster than Will would be – to the exit. Whether to deal with the others or to make a run for it is unclear – Will doesn't want to hope either way.

"You're not getting out of here" Mason tells Will as a thud echoes from outside, followed by a shout. It's impossible to tell who from.

Will backs towards the shelves of pans, skin prickling. His pulse feels steady; like he's not reached a state of panic. Like this is still within his definition of normality.

"It's not about wanting you dead" says Mason. "It's about repayment. You're in debt to me, Mr Graham. And debt's an ugly thing."

Will crouches, reaching his hand under the shelves for purchase on Feverria's gun.

"I hate ugly things."

Will's fingers touch the butt of the gun as something heavy swings into the small of his back.

"Screaming's good though. Keep that up."

Will uncoils, grips again at his knife as Feverria, still at ground level, rolls him onto his back and lands a thick fist into his stomach.

There are white spots blotting Will's vision and a ringing in his ears from the noise he's making.

He thinks that maybe, maybe he should avoid kitchens altogether. That dying in one is inevitable somehow.

"Don't sound so upset. You told me you were going to help me find Hannibal. And here we are!"

No amount of inner strength is helping Will coordinate the movements of the knife in his hand. He's jabbing and twisting his arms and aiming it at the man behind him, but his senses are stinging from the pain in his gut and Feverria has a grip on his shoulders that makes it near impossible. The floor beneath him reverberates with heavy footfalls and unless this is Matthew with a saviour complex, Will is increasingly ready to accept that he'll be dead within minutes.

"You won't lure Hannibal here through me" he says as the knife is grappled from his fingers and tape wraps around his wrists.

"He already knows you're here. He's not falling for it" he says, wincing as Roscoe – *not Matthew* – lifts him onto his knees and tapes his ankles together.

"You've got a brave mouth on you for someone who couldn't even figure how to kill a cripple with a clear shot."

Survival right now is dependent on Matthew not having entirely forsaken him. That, and blind, improbable luck. Like being able to pull the flickknife out of his socks without the man behind him noticing.

Mason's voice rattles on with threats and talk of retribution, of plans to secure Hannibal's entrapment and how what happens to Will is going to ensure it. Will's fingers fidget around the bottom of his trousers but without vision behind him, it's hard to tell how much is being seen by Roscoe.

More footsteps – lighter and faster, this time, and Will feels a lilt in his stomach – hoping, still *hoping*, and he should have learned from experience how harmful that is – to see Matthew. Polished shoes come into view and they're not Matthew's worn out pumps.

He's fighting alone.

He feels the bump of the handle in his socks and curls the rest of his fist above it, obscuring any view of the hidden weapon. He tries to sit further back on his heels, eyes fixed on Mason's chair as it steers further into the kitchen.

"Eddie, will you get us a chair?"

Will is loosely aware of both Feverria and Roscoe stood too close behind him and he unfurls his fingers briefly.

Eddie reappears, struggling to drag a high-backed, gilded chair with one working arm. So *that's* where Will hit.

"Not the dining chairs" states Mason. "Don't want to get blood on them before we're even open."

Eddie carries the chair back out past Mason and Will resumes working at freeing the knife from his sock. There are limits to the pains he can endure and he's reaching their upper

levels. No matter how tempting self-annihilation would be, he'd rather have it on his own terms than Mason's.

His fingers catch the handle, angling it under the lower edge of the tape. A small flick of his thumb frees the blade from its case and neither of the men behind him makes any movement to suggest they've noticed. Short presses angled downwards loosen the tape on his wrists, and a couple of short flicks have his ankles half-freed. Roscoe and Feverria don't move.

Eddie returns, breathy, with a steel chair – simple, gleaming and solid. Easy to clean. Eddie's knuckles are wrecked and there's blood coming from his arm. Mason seems oblivious to his discomfort, or maybe he's testing his resilience by seeing how much he's prepared to suffer on his behalf. On an unspoken cue, the two men behind Will bend to lift him by the arm to the waiting chair. Two seconds later, Roscoe and Feverria have butted heads and there's a red slice across Feverria's arm, and Will's knife rests in Roscoe's chest, the hole around it hot and leaking heavily.

"You're starting to make me angry" announces Mason and it must gall him to not be able to join in.

It's only another 4 seconds until Will is backed onto the metal chair, jaw smarting and stomach searing, with fresh tape wrapping round his wrists, his middle, his ankles and the chair. Matthew is still nowhere to be seen.

"Dearest" calls Mason, and his voice crackles with feedback as he tries to raise his voice. "Margot, dear, we're ready for you."

Will is starting to regret not taking Hannibal's offer to run from everything, pretend to call Kade and just fling himself under the tires of the first moving car he sees. He's regretting not throwing a knife into Mason the second he entered the kitchen. There's no give in any of the tape securing him to the frame of the chair and the glint in Mason's eyes is as close to an expression of evil as a man without a face can manage.

Footsteps behind Will retreat as Margot enters the kitchen from behind Mason's chair. She looks weathered, somehow. Harder, even more than the last time they'd met.

"Margot," says Mason as Margot, dressed in angles of red and black, rests a hand on Mason's shoulder. "Margot, I thought you might want a chance to deal with the reason you don't have any… working lady parts anymore."

"No, Mason dearest, that was you" she answers, voice cold and eyes set on Will.

"Details, details. Feverria, where's the little one got to?"

Twisting to see is not an option – Will's dependent on the narration of Mason to explain who and where everyone is. By the cessation of choking sounds, he guesses that Roscoe's either unconscious or dead. The footsteps and a sound like a weight being dragged deepens the impending sense of dread. "He's out" says Feverria.

The only things offering Will any reassurance is that if he's feeling out of his depth, Eddie is faring as badly, if in different ways. The nonchalance with which the deaths of his associates are being treated seems far worse than the calculated cruelty of Mason's carefully offered instructions.

"So the plan had been to catch you to*mor*row" says Mason, "and when your psychiatrist was eating in the restaurant, we were working out which bit of you to *feed* him. Figured we'd make him angry first, you see. See how he'd cope in public."

Will's fear is coiled inside him like something livid. His fingertips are growing numb from constriction and his head feels heavy on his shoulders.

"He doesn't do angry the way that you do, Mason."

"Anyway" continues Mason. "Your turning up here, when we're supposed to be *cele*brating, and you having one of your killing tantrums…has kind of screwed things."

"He wasn't going to fall for it anyway. He knows you planned some–"
"I'd stop there if I were you" interjects Margot, hand still resting warningly on Mason's shoulder.

Mason ignores her.

"So now, we're going to be creative about how to make the cannibal angry. Oh, he'll come. And it'll be for you. But you still owe me."

"Kill me and he'll find you and kill you before you have a chance to notice he's even here. He'll tear the skin from your eyelids and eat it in front of you" says Will, and finds the words oddly reassuring.

"You say that, but I'm about to, and he's clearly not here. Eddie?"

Eddie looks increasingly ashen-faced but hides it well. He's wrapped a strip of black cloth around his upper arm in a crude tourniquet and the only skin he's showing is blooming with fresh shades of pinks and yellows. The way he answers with "boss" sounds hesitant, resentful, even.

"Eddie, where's your knife?"

"Dropped it."

"There's one in Roscoe. Take that."

Eddie seems better at hiding his horror with each new instruction. Aside from a short squelch, there's little sound in the kitchen beyond the uneven breathing of its occupants. Eddie's breath is heavy at Will's back. There's a hint of something sterile in it; vodka, perhaps. It blends with the growing scent of cleaning fluid.

"It's a shame I can't do this myself" says Mason.

Margot rolls her eyes sideways.

“Must you?”

There’s another pause while Eddie’s breathing speeds up, hitting panicking pitch.

“We must, dear. We talked about this. Feverria, how’s the little one doing?”

Behind Will, there’s the sound of cloth dragging on tile and Feverria’s heavy breath.

“Show Mr Graham.”

Matthew doesn’t look like Matthew when he’s folded over himself, limbs limp and twisted. His head lolls towards the ground and his face looks fruit that’s been half chewed. His jaw is at the wrong angle and there’s red spattered from his nose and mouth. There’s only the faintest rise of breath in his chest that shows there’s life left in him.

“Guess he’s not helping” says Feverria, and Will wants to tear himself from the chair and rip chunks out of him for this. There’s a new pain sitting dull inside him from the sight of Matthew and everything’s taking too long. The sterile stench of alcohol grows stronger, and he’s clinging to the hope that Matthew’s somehow faking it, that he’s holding onto pretence for long enough to plan an escape. That he’d still try and save Will and not just himself, even if it’s more than he deserves.

He regrets his impatience at the exact moment that Eddie takes the knife, still wet from Roscoe’s chest, and presses it into the skin beneath Will’s left eye. He’s jerking his head back, trying to shift his weight on the chair, and all that happens is Feverria steps up to hold him rigid by his hair.

“There’s something almost poetic about this, wouldn’t you say?” asks Mason. Eddie’s looking to him for approval, or possibly for an instruction that the plan might have changed, that he can stop.

There’s nothing, so Eddie presses in, splitting the skin on Will’s cheek in a thin, stinging line. Will hisses through his teeth and refuses to scream.

“Come now, you’ll get no meat off him that way” admonishes Mason and Will shuts his eyes, tries to pull himself out of the situation. Sink into the stream.

Eddie slants the knife sideways; cuts again from the same starting point and traces a new line, from under-eye to ear. Will’s cheek is wet and his breathing is coming out in a stuttering growl.

The stream feels cold around him, fizzing and stinking of cleaning product and alcohol and it’s not letting him fall under its surface.

“Margot, dear, show him how it’s done.”

Eddie’s hands are trembling and the knife passes in front of Will’s eyes, red slithering off its sharpest edge.

“Scars become certain faces, Will” she says, stoically playful, “I think yours might be one of them.”

“Don’t” he’s saying, frantic, and the smile tilting Margot’s face looks put upon, apologetic, even.

“This could go a lot worse for you” she states plainly, blade pressing in, further along than the first cut and angled in a way that slices sideways, more than simply cutting. She moves the knife slowly, and this seems to be for Mason’s benefit as much as any imagined reluctance on her part.

“You can scream more, you –“

Mason stops speaking at the moment the lights go out.

The metal withdraws from Will’s face and a second later, Feverria’s grip drops from his hair with a shout. There’s another thud, and something heavy drops into the shelf of pans.

“Margot? Turn a light on, will you?”

Margot doesn’t speak and the tape around the chair starts to loosen in short bursts.

“Eddie? Feverria?”

There’s another grunt and a sound like something trickling onto the floor.

The next sound is Margot; a shout of surprise and a sound like skin slapping tiles. Will’s hands are almost free of the tape – twisting the last trails off his wrists and reaching to free his ankles. Blood spills into his eyes as he bends, stinging and sharp.

There’s a smell like perfume; something more crisp and at odds with the cleaner now clogging the air. Will’s splaying his hands along the worktop, trying to forge his way towards the exit before any light can reveal his location. His movements are slow, jagged and hindered by the accumulation of hits he’s earned over the course of the evening. There’s a scuffling sound next to him – cat-like and uncharacteristic of anyone else in the place and Will’s panicking in case Mason had other people hidden out in other rooms. There’s a glow from the back door and Mason’s still calling out, demanding an answer from Margot or anyone still breathing.

“I’m here” calls Feverria, sluggish and at least four metres from where Will is leaning on the wall.

“Use your lighter, will you?” asks Mason.

An arm wraps around Will’s middle and another presses his mouth quietly shut. “Run” whispers the voice – female and coarse, as the arm around his middle propels him forward, round the corner towards the faint glow of outside as the click of a lighter sounds from the heart of the kitchen.

Will is no more than a foot away from the door when fire licks at the walls of the kitchen, spilling onto the floor in a jagged loop around where Mason sits. The orange, purpling chemical glow highlights two fallen figures on the ground; Eddie and Matthew. Feverria swirls in the flame, his jacket glowing and singed. Mason has no voice for screaming but the repetition of Margot's name reverberates through the building.

The person who'd dragged Will out is backing away, black hooded jacket pulled over her face and little more than sharp grey blue eyes are on show as she turns to Will. *Bedelia*.

"He doesn't need me now he has you" Bedelia says carefully, regaining her breath. "You're my escape plan. It was imperative that you were able to get out. And that Mason was…got."

Will stares at her, knowing what this means and knowing that inside the building, Matthew's on the ground and the fire's not retreating. And that Matthew has fewer people to look out for him than even Will does. He nods; it's as close to thanks as he can articulate. He wipes blood out of his eye with the back of his hand, takes a lungful of unsmoked air and ducks back into the building.

"Will –"

He's ignoring Bedelia's shouting as he tentatively retraces his steps, one hand at his stomach by way of holding himself together. The firelight shows the spots of blood from his route out and he thinks of Hansel and Gretel following trails to the witch's lair instead of back to a home that didn't want them.

"The fumes – cover your mouth" shouts Bedelia. If Will was still subscribing to notions of guilt, he'd feel at least a pang now as she coughs through the darkening smoke and follows him in. She pulls a black wrap of textured material from her own face. There's an abrupt look of horror as she gets close enough to see the damage and it's swallowed immediately. She wraps the fabric round Will's mouth and nose, trying to not to knock against the exposed cheek, and warns him to be quick. She's out again before he has a chance to say anything that might sound like thanks.

There's a creeping pool of fire between him and Matthew, and Mason's voice sounding slower, distorted as the heat twists the mechanisms of his voice interfacing.

Matthew's awake; protected from the worst of the smoke by his proximity to the floor. He's fumbling, pushing his fingers into the ground and trying to press himself up, seeing if he can work his way out through the fire and not get burned. It seems fitting.

There's half a body's length between them and already the heat is stinging. There's no fire blanket, no protection and no easy way out of this. Not for Matthew.

There's a smell of burning hair, of Eddie and his still shape on the ground. Flames are licking the wheels of Mason's chair and his feet and Margot hovers like an unsteady apparition behind him, looking uncertain about whether to save him or just run. The dining room of the restaurant behind her is fiercely alight – as though whatever was spread through the kitchen this evening had already been soaked into the eating area long before whatever played out here came to pass.

“Marg-“

Matthew’s coughing, split face looking in the firelight like it’s melting and Will reasons that even if Matthew wants to kill him when this is all done, he’ll be in no state to manage it just yet. Pulling his jacket off to subdue the flames, he reaches down and pulls Matthew to him, pushing him up so he’s half draped across his shoulder and his arms are holding him up by his back and his butt. “Hang on” he whispers, coughing into the cloth on his face, and Matthew swings his arm rounds, trying to grip onto any bit of Will that might support him.

“We’re almost clear” he says through the fabric. The fumes are noxious; Matthew’s barely conscious through them and as the flames gain height, there’s no sign of Mason, Margot or Eddie. Will finds no room in his thoughts to worry or care. His legs feel raw and he’s scared to look down in case it’s from living flame and not just the strain of carrying Matthew. The cloth’s pressing against his face and everything *hurts* so much and the air’s too thick to get into his lungs and his eyes and ears are stinging and there’s crashing from the building around them and the door’s *so close* – just three more steps…

# Soft

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Displeased would be the word for Hannibal's expression in this moment. As though his emotions were never allowed to run their full gamut when translated to the gentle movements of his face. Something as vulgar and obvious as rage couldn't penetrate the curls and angles of his face – as though any anger he contained was so enormous that it had no choice but to be wrapped tight inside the skin and only hinted at through the smallest inflection.

Will is staring through his lashes at the small downturn of Hannibal's mouth and his waking brain is trying to calculate how displeased he could be, and what the cause of it might be.

His usual instinctive panic is absent and his thoughts are slow to pool together.

Everything is so *soft*.

*Light*.

There's something like a cloud resting on him and he tries to open his eyes wider to see it, and can't, and wonders if he's maybe floated skyward, but then there'd be no Hannibal up there if he had. No displeased, serious looking Hannibal coughing pointedly into his hand.

Will considers, slowly, that he may be a little drugged right now.

"How are you feeling, Will?"

His voice sounds like it's rolling across waves to reach him, loud then dipping quiet, then loud again…

"Good" he says and it comes out like a slur. There's something like amusement in those serious eyes that are staring at him like he's some terribly silly thing there for Hannibal's amusement.

He's starting to feel a little less fuzzy as the implications of his last thought have a chance to worm their way through his brain.

Instinct starts nudging at him, reminding him that he should probably try and escape. That a combination of being drugged and Hannibal being present was never a good thing for him, and that Hannibal is too many things to him for his brain to process in its fluid state

He moves to push himself up and the soft thing he pushes into just sinks further away from him. His arms won't move up or down and *oh*.

"I was concerned you might further aggravate your injuries" says the doctor with soft, wavering words.

It seems unlikely that the soft restraints are there solely for Will's benefit.

"The analgesic will make the recuperation period more comfortable" continues the voice and it sounds muffled again, like the words are meandering through clouds to reach him.

Will tries to make words to ask what he's recovering from, what happened, where he is and where Matthew is. Something comes out like a slur, or a whir, and Hannibal regards him carefully.

"You're not at risk of harm as you are now. Rest, please. I have another to attend to."

The questions working their way through the caverns and corners of his head don't assemble into anything expressible. Will lets his eyes shut, dimly aware of a stinging sensation that he can't place.

He could use some rest, he thinks.

Chapter End Notes

The next update will be a lot longer than this one - I'm catching up to the bits I still haven't written yet, so updates may slow down...thank you so much for reading and for all the feedback!
x

# Clean

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Days pass in a fog. Will gets used to the feeling of his skin like soft rubber, of dim sparks of pain that fizz out under fresh medication. His bathroom breaks are assisted by Hannibal and it's his own lack of coordination that keeps him needing help, rather than any injury. He supposes it's the drugs and can't find a way to work his keener senses through them.

The first time Hannibal bathes him is the first time he sees himself; dressings peeled off, and this is how he knows he's numb because he's always winced when hair on his skin gets caught up in the glues and wrappings of bandages. It's the only concession he's ever allowed himself to childish responses to pain; the only thing he doesn't instinctively work to suppress. As the last stretch of dressing is pulled smoothly off his stomach, Will only blinks and waits for feeling which never manifests. He's naked. He doesn't remember undressing.

"Please, step into the bath."

The mark on his stomach stretches like a livid purple worm. It had looked pink before; a deep pink, but like something healing, like skin was growing with the scar tissue. Now, now it looks *alive*.

"Will."

Will bends, grips the side of the white tub and steps carefully into the water. That he's naked should be bothering him, somehow, but he's vaguely aware that Hannibal knows more of him than just his flesh parts. This doesn't feel new.

Hannibal pulls a white stool up to the head of the bathtub and removes his jacket. He watches Will with a studious air. His gaze is unrelenting and Will hides from it; looks down at the water, at the way the ripples of the water skim over pink and red bumps on his calves. The faded smudges of browns and yellows on his wrists next to scabs, nearly ready to be picked off. He can't *feel* any of it; just registers a gentle fizz near the damaged bits of him and a muted awareness that he's not as safe as his relative comfort says he should be.

"You're recovering admirably" says Hannibal. He's reaching for a flannel; a soft white thing that he dips into the water; Will can't even tell the temperature of what he's immersed in; can barely tell it's wet but for memory telling him it should be. "It's remarkable," he continues, "the perseverance of spirit contained in you."

He presses the flannel to Will's collarbone, wiping at the skin with deftly managed pressure. Dips the flannel back in the water and repeats the motion on his shoulder, rolling and rinsing.

Hannibal's words start to penetrate and Will worries that he said it because his perseverance may be tested further. His muscles begin to knot. It seems like a while since his body's experienced tension and it coils inside his skin but won't translate into movement. It's not

paralysis; it's more that there's too much gravity keeping him heavy against the base of the tub.

"Will, I want you to allow yourself reprieve from your battle instincts. Let me."

"*Why* is that what you want?" he asks, voice scratchy and unfamiliar.

Hannibal rinses the flannel out and continues to wash, working the soft fabric across Will's chest, some inches above the wide scar.

"When you place yourself in a state of constant anxiety, you force every experience to become a fight in which you are seldom the victor."

Will splashes his hand in the water and something in the futility of the gesture emphasises Hannibal's words. The man stands, pulls his chair round to the other side of the bath and resumes washing the other side.

"Most 'speriences are fights."

The way his thoughts won't arrange themselves into more than a handful of reactions is frustrating. There are questions he needs to be asking but he can't work out what they are, yet.

"Because you view yourself as an opponent when you should be a conqueror."

Will stares at his feet, at the ripples of skin above them that looks like burnt wrapping, and memory prickles his neurons into motion.

*Fire*.

Fire, and a heavy weight in his arms.

Chemicals and stench and so much *pain*.

Hannibal presses at the skin around Will's faded bullet wound with some reverence. Massages the skin around it with both hands and shifts closer. His breath is steady on the back of Will's neck and Will is starting to *feel* it. Feels it contrast against the silk of the water.

"The others?" he asks.

Hannibal's hands still, holding his forearm out of the water. His bottom lip curls into his opening mouth and this expression never means anything good. He places Will's arm back into the water as though it were something detached. Something not quite his, yet.

"Tell me," he says carefully, "the outcomes you desired for them."

There's an image in Will's head of Matthew, unconscious and heavy, and of his sparking eyes and the *need* for those eyes not to be closed and for his body not to be still and limp.

“Matthew has to be alive” he says, faintly aware that the water around him seems cooler than is comfortable. The slow blooming of his senses doesn’t soothe him in any way and Hannibal’s expression says nothing.

“Because you wish again for the intimacy of his company? Or because guilt would weigh too heavily on you if he were not?”

Will could argue that either reason has a certain amount of truth to it.

“I…”

He can’t calculate a way to answer that would aid his self-preservation. Honesty doesn’t strike him as wise but it’s hard to think carefully with his head still full of cloud and worry.

“…Both, I think.”

Hannibal doesn’t offer him a reaction.

“And what of the others?”

Will stops himself from saying that he doesn’t care. His loose and heavy tongue can only be excused so much clumsiness from the medication surging through his system. He thinks of Mason, of the mechanical edge to his voice and his unparalleled cruelty and finds the words easy to speak.

“Mason needed to die.”

As he says it, it feels real, like some small horror has been purged from the world he occupies.

Hannibal looks pleased.

“And Margot?”

Will finds it harder to think of Margot dead. He sees her as pinned by more overbearing forces than she could resist, sees her trying to sculpt herself into something powerful with such tiny scope for movement and such blunted tools. And he remembers her cruelty, wielded casually, as though the power she held wasn’t entirely known to her.

“Depends” Will says. Hannibal runs warmer water into the bath, rinsing the flannel in the running stream.

“What does it depend on?” he asks, impassive. “She cut you with no small depth.”

“She’s not as obvious, as simple as Mason” he says, daring to catch Hannibal’s eyes. “It depends on whether she still wants to kill…” he wants to say ‘us’ and stops the presumption from escaping. Speaking of himself as a shared unit with Hannibal still sits uncomfortably in his torn gut.

Hannibal’s smile touches the crinkles around his eyes and he looks almost proud.

“And their cohorts?” he asks, lifting Will’s hand out of the water and massaging it, wiping and pressing with renewed care. “What fates would you assign them?”

Will’s thoughts drift back to Matthew, of whether he lives, whether he meant to serve them his head on a plate for his own need for power, whether he knew or believed that Will wanted to save him, in the end. The others hardly seem to matter.

“They weren’t deserving of any of it” says Will, voice feeling more comfortable in his throat. The gentle numbness is giving way to a feeling like pins and needles and his skin feels too tight around him. Hannibal runs his thumb in small circles across Will’s wrist; gentle pulses across the fade of bruise and Will can almost – *almost* – feel it.

“They were all…incidental. Their deaths weren’t any kind of celebration, any punishment. It wasn’t justice. Just…” Will waits for the right word to present itself. It doesn’t. For a long moment, there’s just the sound of water, rolling and splashing.

“Lean forward, please.”

Will obeys and feels the heaviness of his own skull bearing downwards. The flannel laps at his shoulders, his back, and it’s a baptism of sorts. His face is hot. A faint sting hums into being and he moves to touch it, to find the source of the first smart of pain he’s felt in days. Hannibal swats his hand down as soon as it rises.

“Please. You must not aggravate it.”

Water sloshes down his back and as the movement slows, Will supposes Hannibal is studying some new abrasion on his skin, some new mark to challenge the one he gifted.

“Consider how wishing for the outcome of the lives and deaths of those people positions you” he says, voice close to Will’s ear and breath rustling his hair. “What does it tell you about yourself,” he asks, massaging the small of Will’s back, “that your wishes for the others were only that they orbit your preferred design?”

“That’s what wishes are” says Will to the water. He understands the implication of Hannibal’s leading words and refuses to acknowledge it.

Hannibal rinses with renewed vigour, hands snaking across Will’s hips. The water distorts the shape of his long fingers; bends them in a way that nature wouldn’t replicate, merges them with the white flannel.

“What is it that made you decide that your wishes should be the ones to manifest in action?” asks Hannibal, pushing the flannel along the underside of Will’s thigh. Hannibal’s words seem somehow more intimate than the proximity of his hands to Will’s flesh. The experience being new doesn’t make it feel any less familiar.

“If I hadn’t, they’d have killed me” Will says simply. Hannibal withdraws his hands from the water, stands up and surveys Will with new coldness. He moves to the foot of the tub.

“And to you it reduces itself down to mere competition and survival” he says.

Will thinks he understands.

“No more than stepping out of the way of a charging herd of cows makes you any less likely to eat beef” he counters, staring directly into Hannibal’s eyes as he speaks.

“A fitting analogy” he replies, kneeling, returning to the water to wash Will’s feet. “And you see how placing yourself as the superior in this, and them as the livestock, what you assert by doing so?”

“I don’t have your god complex.”

The next time Hannibal brushes the flannel against Will’s skin, it’s decidedly less gentle.

“I believe this may be more due to semantics than perhaps you are able to comprehend in your medicated state” he says, clipped.

“I know that I wanted to decide for them” offers Will, meaning it. “I know that I believed the world would be somehow improved for having Mason purged from its surface.”

“And does the world feel purged now?” asks Hannibal, hands creeping up Will’s calves, drawing tiny nerve endings to the surface of his skin. Small impulses coming slowly to life.

“I can’t tell” says Will. All his memory offers is a dissolving shape and slowed down words as Mason called out for his sister. Nothing ended. Just held in a state of uncertainty, with Margot wavering in and out of existence and Hannibal as the one to choose when to open Schroedinger’s box.

“Perhaps because your motivations were swayed by something more sentimental, and this may be what is narrowing your otherwise encompassing perception.”

As Hannibal’s hands skim past Will’s right hand, Will reaches, grabs at Hannibal’s wrist and holds onto it like some small raft. Like a plea.

“Is Matthew alive?” he asks. It’s not a calculated question. It’s not something he’d say to secure Hannibal’s trust. The desperation of his questions only adds to his nakedness. Hannibal strokes his hand in return and it’s not clear if he’s communicating an understanding, or if it’s the gesture of sympathy offered by hospital staff before they announce that their best efforts came to nothing.

“You realise that by asking this, you’re presenting more vulnerability than could be considered wise, all things considered.”

It’s not posed as a question.

Will nods anyway.

Hannibal squeezes his hand – not reassuring, but commanding – and begins washing below Will’s stomach. There’s a faint sting as friction pulls across his scar, and then there’s another kind of nervous reaction as hands dip below his groin, manoeuvring his legs out of the way in

order to better access the skin and hair there. It’s clinical, and it’s not arousal that Will’s feeling. It’s something, though. Intimate doesn’t seem to be the right word. He feels heat rising in his face and it prickles.

There’s a thud from some distant place outside of the bathroom and Hannibal tenses, his hand positioned with the flannel some millimetres from the soft skin of Will’s cock. The cloth brushes it at the tip as he withdraws his hands from the water. Another thud sounds as he wrings out the flannel, laying it on the side of the bathtub.

Will has visions of Hannibal keeping prisoners in soft beds in hundreds of rooms in the house – however big the house is, wherever in the world it is, keeping people like pets to observe and control.

“Forgive me, Will” he says, drying his arms briskly on a white towel. “It appears that my attention is being demanded somewhat discourteously, but please, remain as you are. I do not wish for another’s petulance to interfere beyond necessity.”

Will wonders how much faster Hannibal would be if he just chose to speak plainly. But then, the performance is as much a part of the man as his murderous proclivities.

The next thud is louder, sharper, and is followed by a nearing sound of footsteps.

Hannibal opens the door to the bathroom only wide enough to slip through the exit, shoulders firming into warrior stance. In a half second, the door is almost closed behind him, and as the second completes, it’s swung wide as the source of the footsteps appears, furious, behind Hannibal’s frame.

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Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry...I know it's rude to end a chapter with someone near motionless and naked in a bath. I hope you'll understand why when the next update is posted.
x

# Filth

Chapter Notes

Well, this was inevitable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From the doorway, Matthew looms like lava contained in human skin.

Will doesn't hear what Hannibal whispers in Matthew's ear, but sees some of the tension drop from the younger man's shoulders, and a short nod that hints at obeisance. Hannibal places heavy hands on his shoulders and steers him into the bathroom. Will is somehow more aware of his nakedness and lets his hands drift down in the water to cover himself. Hannibal makes it known that he notices the small movement with a minute, assured smile tilting his face.

"I imagine this answers at least one of your questions, Will."

Hannibal looks faintly inconvenienced as he speaks, and Matthew, still standing mute, looks horrified. Matthew's covered in a white shirt and dark gray slacks, and his face still wears the evidence of the fallout at the restaurant. Shades of yellows and plums tint the skin of his face and his jaw swells a half-inch further out at the side. It's his eyes that seem the most alarming. The fierce little sparks are framed by speckles of red and pink, like the skin is serrated. Like he's frostbitten. Will's eyes feel sore just looking at him.

"What happened to his face?" Matthew asks Hannibal.

Will sits dumbly in the bath and considers that he has yet to see a mirror. As the medication gradually diffuses from his system, it gives way to an increasing sense of directionless dread.

"I was rather hoping to delay this meeting" says Hannibal. "But it seems there is some merit to allowing you opportunity to discuss some things with each other. Matthew, I must warn you –"

"If you didn't want this to happen you should have kept me better drugged, Dr Lecter."

Matthew's expression looks like barely contained thunder.

Will moves to sit up in the bath, hands finding the sides enough to push himself upright, and the exertion almost winds him. Matthew stalks toward him, movements hampered by residual impact injuries. A clammy hand pushes Will back down, shoulder first. "Stay put" he instructs.

Hannibal's expression is one of distaste but he makes no move to intervene.

“You watched me get cut” he says from behind Will, hands resting heavy on Will’s shoulders, thumbs pressing warningly into the sides of his neck. Will tests his capacity for further movement by drawing his legs up in a token gesture of modesty. They move slower than his thoughts, as though netted by the water. There’s a chill creeping through him.

“I watched you try to hand me over to them” Will counters. “Out of…frustration? Impatience? A lack of carnage?”

He tries to twist his neck to look at Matthew but hands push his head back forward. His view is of the steel taps, and Hannibal standing in his periphery.

“I think you left me there,” says Matthew, bravado growing in his voice with the way it rolls and sings, “because you knew you were going to lose if you tried to fight.” He tightens his grasp and this is for Hannibal’s benefit, not Will’s. It’s peacocking.

“I think” says Will, softly, “that I’d decided a knife wound wasn’t any more than you could handle.”

Matthew’s hands creep closer round Will’s neck and it’s less like a threat than it is foreplay. He’s grateful for the coldness of the water and the muteness of sensation, and resolves to stop analysing why all his thoughts of sex are intimately involved with violence and the proximity of death.

“So why’d you come back?” asks Matthew and Will swallows, feeling the brush of fingers against his throat. Matthew sounds as though he wants to believe something about Will’s motives that he hasn’t shared with him and if only Will’s thoughts could order themselves more clearly, he’d be able to do something about that. Use it and manipulate it, somehow.

“I’m not saying I thought you didn’t deserve it” says Will. Hannibal shifts and from the outskirts of his vision, Will sees him mouth something to Matthew.

Matthew presses his fingers, hard, into Will’s throat and draws out a damp little choke. He’s baiting Hannibal. He’s using Will as the prop, seeing how much he can get away with, how much of a claim he can stake, before Hannibal concedes that he’s a threat. That he’s worthy of fear.

“Forgive me,” says Hannibal, unphased by Matthew’s display. “I should allow you both some privacy.”

He exits the bathroom and Will suspects that whatever chemicals have been poured into him and Matthew since they arrived will be administered again as soon as Hannibal returns.

Will is starting to understand how they were only enough to prop each other up while they reached for something more grand than themselves. The curator of their experiences. He lifts his hands to Matthew’s and prises the fingers away from his neck, keeping a damp grip on his wrists. Pulls him down, knowing that Matthew will have to choose between bending or kneeling behind him if his grip can hold strong enough.

He kneels.

“Why’d you come back?” Matthew repeats. He sounds less brave, more dangerous.

Will doesn’t want to answer. Doesn’t want to say it was Hannibal’s suggestion and that he wasn’t given the chance to decide his own motives. Doesn’t want to admit that if he’d had the time, he’d have probably gone back for something as sentimental as just *wanting Matthew*. Because Hannibal wouldn’t. Hannibal wouldn’t let something as vulnerable as emotion slip out.

“Do you wish I hadn’t?” he asks instead.

Matthew’s mouth reaches Will’s throat.

“I think you’d have been better off if you’d stayed out of there.”

His voice is wet with spittle.

“But you wouldn’t be.”

“I think your death wish is showing again, magpie” he says, biting, light, against the meat of Will’s neck.

“Matthew…”

Matthew twists his wrists out of Will’s grasp. There’s a pause and a sound of something soft and cloth-like falling on the tiles. There’s no other sound from beyond the bathroom and Will worries that Hannibal is outside, listening, and then he worries that he’s not.

The faster his senses spill back into life, the looser his sense of safety becomes. Adrenalin rises through his chest. Matthew’s in front of him now, all his mottled skin on show, bending like he wants to climb into the tub and Will thinks that everything about this is a terrible idea.

“You can’t. I can’t’.”

“You’re… wrecked” Matthew says, standing upright. Like he’s surveying a property he’d been considering buying, only to find half the rooms burnt out.

“Penalties of coming back for you” says Will, gripping the side of the bath and twisting to climb out of it. His stomach sears and the wave of fresh pain is almost refreshing after the numbness.

“That was your stupid decision.”

“And it was yours to run in there first” counters Will, fingers slipping on the white ceramic and legs skidding under him. “You’re eight shades of purple, Matthew. He’s coming back any minute. What are you trying to prove?”

Will is being lifted upward and laid out on the cool tiles of the floor. His attempts to sit upright are pushed back down as Matthew straddles him, movements stilted. There’s still a bandage over his thigh and between their drugged reactions and carnival of injuries, there’s something incongruous about Matthew’s swelling cock.

“That you’re not the strong little god he thinks you are.”

Will lurches to push Matthew off him. His arms are trembling with the effort but the strength and direction is still lacking.

“All you’re showing is that your…your *libido* overrides your better senses” Will says, chest heavy and air flowing uneasily. “*Rutting* is hardly a way to endear yourself to the man you worship.”

“Still got more power over you than he has” he says through a smile and toys damp fingers on the inside of Will’s thigh, fingers skimming his balls and highlighting the gradual rise of Will’s cock. Of all the ways his body could have chosen to come back to life…

“Seriously?”

Matthew strokes him, gentle. Any feeling Will has there is still slow to respond and he feels useless, laid out and heavy. There’s enough strength in him, he thinks, to punch Matthew, but he’s thinking of Hannibal’s words about how everything with him is always a fight. About how he still feels comfortable with Matthew close by, even with the reluctance and the strategy and the absence of emotional sincerity. The oddness of the situation doesn’t penetrate as much as he thinks it should.

“He’ll come back. Any minute, he’ll walk through –”

“I know” he smiles, trailing his fingers across Will’s perineum and sitting back on his heels. He dips his head, licks his lips and *oh*.

“Dare you to push me away” he says. His tongue laps at the head of Will’s cock and it’s a nervous movement; something rarely practiced. Will stretches his hands toward Matthew’s head. He could push him off. He’s not pulled under by the surge of wants, *needs*, that Matthew’s trying to coax out of him, not yet. There’s still a soft buffer between his brain and his responses and it’s dissipating, slowly, with each clumsy gesture. If dignity were an option, Will could try and stop it. It’s just that, naked, prone on the damp floor… there’s hardly enough left of him to lose.

And also, he thinks, as Matthew wets a finger, presses it lightly on the outside, also… he’s wondering how Hannibal would react.

“I wanted to kill you” says Matthew, teeth skimming the tip of Will’s cock as he head bobs up and he stares with red rimmed eyes.

“This is an indirect way of going about it” says Will. He lifts his hands up and pushes them into the tufts of Matthew’s short hair, tangling the unkempt strands of dark brown in his damp fingers.

Matthew laps again, and pushes his finger with more force, teasing at the entrance.

“Killing’s easy” Matthew says, bringing his hand up and spitting on it messily.

“So this is what, your terrible plan? Or a peace offering?”

Matthew pushes, more fingers, only this time his nails are smooth. Will imagines Hannibal grooming Matthew, manoeuvring his medicated body until he's trimmed, washed, neatened and neutralised. Imagines the shared intimacy of just the two of them and wonders if Hannibal was as careful with Matthew as he is with him. His eyes prickle. His back throbs and his breathing gets thinner in answer to Matthew's awkward tongue.

"This isn't peace. It's how I *win*" says Matthew, and now Will's wishing he'd stop using his mouth for so many words. "You haven't told me why you came –"

"Stop talking, Matthew."

Matthew sits up and yanks Will's thighs out to a wide angle, like he's trying to split a wishbone.

"You expected me to find success with Mason" Matthew says, spitting again on his hand and slicking his dick. "And you wanted to get in the way of that."

Will moves to sit up and his spine and stomach knot in sharp pain. He rests back down, adjusts to the new angle as Matthew grips his legs and pushes them further apart. Will's arms lie uselessly at his side.

"You weren't in a great position when I found you" Will says and Matthew laughs, cold and sharp. It's a sound that's never suited him.

"I had my out" he answers, pressing the tip inside and the sting Will expects isn't there – it's more a dull growing pressure, a growing stretch and pull and it doesn't feel close.

"But" he says, with a short push that shunts Will's body along the tiles, "It's cute that you tried, magpie."

"I got you out" says Will, trying to hold himself steady on the ground with nothing to grip on to.

"Hannibal" corrects Matthew, pushing, longer, more controlled, "got us both out."

Will feels himself contracting around Matthew, tightening, but in short waves. Like he's still not completely present.

Matthew re-angles his hips, pulls Will off the ground so his balance is shared between Matthew's grip and his own body weight on his shoulders. With each new shove of Matthew's body into him, there's a sound of slapping skin on wet floor. The impacts reverberate through Will, through his spine and his skull, and it feels like a kind of resuscitation.

"Why – aren't you asking – why Hannibal – came back – then?" he asks. He feels like he's smiling but his mouth won't make the movement fully. Will's loosely aware of a memory of something being cut but his thoughts don't want to explore it.

Matthew's face is set in a grimace and he's fucking in the same way he fights; looking for weaknesses and opportunities for the upper hand. Will recognises Hannibal in his actions,

and he sees himself too, if only by default.

“Hannibal only wanted to check that Mason was dead” Matthew says, pushing rhythmically and barely breaking a sweat. “We were a bonus, I guess.”

Will doesn’t believe that Hannibal’s motives were so blunt. His doubt shows in his eyes.

“He doesn’t *revolve* around you” says Matthew in answer to Will’s expression. He speeds up, gripping harder and fucking hard enough into Will that his skull shakes against the tiles with the repeated impact. Will’s still not fully hard; still waxing in and out of coherence and need.

“How’d you figure – that?” asks Will. “You were – *out* when I got you”

Matthew slows, frees one hand and wraps it around the base of Will’s cock. He thumbs lines up, down, up, down, as it stiffens in his grasp.

“Heard Hannibal talking to the sister.”

Will feels vaguely sore, and sick.

“When?”

“Day after we got here. He said his goodbyes to her before dosing me.”

It’s difficult to maintain arousal when trying to determine the extent of death in his wake.

“She’s alive” Will murmurs, mostly to himself.

“Yeah, and he let – her go despite what she did to you. So.”

“What else did you hear?” he asks. He knows that the more Matthew talks, the more he’s prolonging this, whatever this is meant to be. He hates that Matthew knows more, has been closer to Hannibal’s workings than he has, knows the death tally that Hannibal tried to coax out of Will earlier with cryptic clues and leading messages. Matthew feels like a conduit to something else that he’s trying to reach and Matthew doesn’t feel like…enough. He’s insubstantial, somehow, even pushed up inside him and forcing his body to his movements.

“That everyone else is dead and that you talk too much, magpie.”

Just like that, all the conundrums posed by Hannibal appear solved and Will’s back in the moment with something more immediate he can focus on. He wraps a hand around Matthew’s uninjured thigh; gripping for balance and to make himself more of an active participant. Trying to steer it more to his wants, if he could figure out what they were.

Will refuses to shut up. “I still don’t understand what you’re doing” he says, struggling to focus his eyes on anything but the blur of Matthew’s face, and the ceiling.

Matthew lets go of his cock and starts pulling out, slow and with a look of hunger.

“I imagine that is fairly apparent from his vigorous efforts at penetration, Will.”

Matthew freezes at Hannibal's voice and Will chokes on a small breath.

The inevitability of his return makes it no less alarming.

"Continue, Matthew. I doubt my presence is an obstacle and I sense no objection from Will."

Matthew licks his lips with a snake-like flicker. Hannibal stands over them, white shirt sleeves still rolled up and devil smile pulling at the corners of his eyes.

Matthew freshens his grip on Will, bony fingers and thumbs digging into the worn skin above Will's hipbones. The push back in is violent, domineering.

Hannibal crouches and rests a warm, dry hand on Will's chest. Like he's checking his heart rate.

"Tell me," begins Hannibal, eyes locked on Will's, "how you –"

"Don't" says Will through gritted teeth as Matthew pulls back and pushes, surges back in. "Don't ask me how this makes me feel."

"You are right. That seems evident," says Hannibal, looking pointedly at Will's erection. It's straining now, untouched.

"Do you not find Matthew's efforts somewhat…obvious?" asks Hannibal, the pressure from his hand sinking deeper into Will's chest.

"Shut up" says Matthew.

Static plays at the corners of Will's vision. He reaches an arm up to grip the one on his chest, like he's holding everything in place. It's still not enough, somehow.

Hannibal's other hand reaches for Will's forehead, brushing curls through warm fingertips.

"I think what you are missing, Matthew," says Hannibal, looking at Will and the way his eyes are widening, "is the abstract of the man you keep claiming to know so intimately."

Matthew kneads the skin caught in his hands, pushing it into bruises to match his own.

"I know him in more ways than you ever have, Dr Lecter."

Hannibal says nothing and Will fights to get air into his lungs.

"You've never felt how his skin trembles when he's close" says Matthew, pulling back and holding Will around him.

"Or how his mouth drops open, even when he thinks he's still in control" he continues.

The next push judders through Will and his head knocks against the floor.

"No. I do not, yet." says Hannibal, the hand in Will's hair reaching round and cradling the back of Will's head, little finger reaching down to stroke lightly at his neck in short steadying

strokes. “You’re being careless with him, Matthew.”

“He can take it.”

“That’s not in dispute” says Hannibal, and his eyes move to Matthew.

Will feels like meat laid out for them. His free hand scrabbles on the ground, tries to reach out toward Matthew. Matthew pulls back.

“I’m merely highlighting that your callousness where Will Graham is concerned betrays your lack of understanding.”

“I thought you had him pegged as a disappointment, Dr Lecter” says Matthew and Will has the impression that he’s talking to slow himself down. Keep up the performance. His relief at Matthew being alive is giving way to aggravation and a slow knotting frustration at the emotional distance between them.

Hannibal’s expression is sour. The hand on Will’s chest moves down and air stutters back into the deeper tributaries of Will’s lungs.

“That is because you only see the obvious” Hannibal tells him. “You think the easiest way to get what you want…”

Hannibal’s hands reach the puckered edge of Will’s scar. His fingers feel like burning.

“…Is to manipulate the most reactive senses to your whims whilst ignoring the thoughts that inform them.”

“That’s a pretty long way of saying that you think fucking him is less interesting than talking to him.”

“Tell me” says Hannibal, “why you think his proclivities tend toward the morbid when the two of you are…intimate?”

Will resists the urge to call out that he’s right there, that they don’t need to talk over him, and doesn’t think to question why Hannibal *knows* this, but he doesn’t think it’ll make a difference and he’s getting closer to just wanting to shoot out all the tension building behind his groin and the psychoanalysis of his boner be damned.

Hannibal skims his fingers across the scar and it sings in new sparks of livid pain. Will gasps from the back of his throat and presses into the skin of Hannibal’s wrists with grasping fingers; into Hannibal’s scars there, given the luxury of time to recover and mould over the experience. It hardly seems fair.

“Because he’s scared of death still” offers Matthew, punching into Will. “He’s not like you or I, Dr Lecter.”

“You’re describing, I believe, your own shortcoming” says Hannibal, resting Will’s head back on the tiles and standing up, letting Will’s arm fall as he unpicks the fingers around his wrist. He stands behind Matthew and places his hands on his bruised shoulders.

“When you tried to kill me, you did not consider that you might lose. And that is why you failed” Hannibal states simply.

“I *failed* because magpie here had a change of heart and went calling for help” says Matthew. He’s burrowing his fingers into Will’s flesh and even with his smoother nails, the skin’s reddening and splitting. He’s still fucking and there’s so much anger in it – Will’s pushing himself onto it, trying to feel as much of the friction as is there but it’s not enough.

“Slow down” instructs Hannibal. Matthew ignores him – speeds up and he’s close – *too* close.

Hannibal bites into the white skin between Matthew’s shoulder and neck and the younger man screams out and stills.

Will swallows the whimper that crawls up his throat.

“I told you to slow down.”

Matthew’s grip has softened and his urgency is depleted. He pushes back into Will, uncertainly and jaggedly. Hannibal seems satisfied and evidence of his reaction shows through the fabric of his trousers.

“What you hide from, Matthew, is any terror that is not of your own making.”

Hannibal kneels at Will’s side, lifting the arm that rests uselessly at his side and bending it towards Will’s face.

“You refuse to look at this face” he tells Matthew “and you treat these injuries only as ugly inconveniences. You fail to see the beauty in them. Their strength.”
Hannibal’s eyes are on Will’s, his fingers gently manipulating Will’s fingers, guiding them to the edges of hair on his jaw. Will feels faintly sick.

Matthew stills again, stares at Will’s face and his mouth thins to a line. He pushes Will’s legs lower and stays where he is.

The first touch, Will’s hardened, nearly numb fingers edging the skin of his own face, it’s uncomfortable. There’s a ridge, soft and like pulp. Under Hannibal’s guidance, his fingers trail up, catching on small solid lines like surgical thread. Stitches. His fingers travel the path of the line, from the side of his mouth to the soft indent of skin under his eye. He’s trembling – the truth of his own disfigurement that he doesn’t want to understand, not yet, pulsing through him with the pent up tension of not enough contact, not enough movement from Matthew inside him.

Hannibal guides his fingers across, to a new line. Thicker, longer, curving to the outside of his jaw. Will sees Eddie’s scared face behind his eyelids, feels the panicked fear rising fresh in him and writhes against the too many hands keeping him in place. The need for the confrontation of reality to be pulverised out of him grows hot and desperate inside his skin.

“Shh” hums Hannibal as Matthew renews his grasp, swelling inside him and pushing in shorter, sharper bursts.

Hannibal tilts Will’s face so the uninjured side rests inches off the tiles, leans over him and opens his mouth.

Hannibal smells of mint, of oil and stove smoke. His tongue laps at the third cut and fingers curl into Will’s, tightening the grasp as Will clenches from the pain of open nerves heating under Hannibal’s mouth. His vision spots red and white and Matthew’s pulling at him, tugging and snaking one hand round to where Will’s cock is dampening at the tip. Hannibal’s fast – he’s off the ground and gripping at Matthew’s wrist before he has a chance to do more than touch.

“You should reclaim the horrors as your own” states Hannibal, voice wet and heavy from Will’s injuries fresh on his tongue.

Matthew pushes and Will can feel the heat, the vibration surging through Matthew’s groin that tells him he’s too close and that his self-restraint has failed him.

“You wanted to show that Will was at your mercy, more than mine, yes?” he asks, and Matthew doesn’t look like he can hear him, eyes locked upward and his muscles tightening. Hannibal wraps a hand round the back of Matthew’s neck and curls his fingers behind his ear. His voice sits low and Will’s gasping because there’s not en*ough*, not of anything.

“I wouldn’t call this a success” Hannibal says as Matthew shudders into Will with an unintelligible shout. He’s spilling, letting go, and Will’s muscles twitch and contract around him as Matthew softens but there’s still nothing for *him*. He reaches up for his erection as Matthew pulls out, defeated.

“No, Will.”

Matthew sags and Hannibal lifts him off his heels and places him in the cool water of the bath with minimal resistance.

“Clean yourself up” he instructs softly, and Matthew shows no small amount of shame as he shakily reaches for the flannel at the side of the bath, mechanically wiping himself and staring through lowered eyelids at Hannibal. He looks more wounded than his bruises or bandage hints at.

“Would you prefer to stay here, or would you prefer a softer surface to lie on than this?” asks Hannibal and Will wants to scream because the tension in him is turning into so much ache.

“I can’t move” Will replies and his voice comes out scratched.

“That is not a complete answer” Hannibal tells him. He pulls a towel from the hook on the wall, folds it in his arms and passes it to Will.

“For your knees” he explains.

“I –“

“You can” Hannibal answers to the protest Will doesn’t complete. “Part of your magnificence is in what you choose to overcome.”

Matthew continues to watch, splashing at the water as Will twists – slowly, carefully, onto his knees, pushing the towel under each one in turn. He negotiates his balance on the palms of his hands, arms shaking with the effort of supporting himself.

“Do you want to suck me?” Hannibal asks, in the same voice as he might ask about a preferred dinner dish.

“No?” says Will, before he can consider his answer. That wanting to is different to being willing to. He looks up, and Hannibal looks indifferent. His hand is around the clasp of his trousers and his zipper looks uncomfortable.

“If I asked you to do it, though, would you?”

Will swallows. His head feels too heavy on his shoulders and his weight feels like a rolling imbalanced thing set to topple him at the next breath.

He looks up at Hannibal and tries not to think of how he must appear, to him or to Matthew. A hand reaches into his curls and tilts his head further up.

“Yes” replies Will, not breaking eye contact.

“And would it be so that I would return the favour?”

The thought of Hannibal’s curved lips on him turns the ache into desperation.

“That would be to ignore the power differential between us” says Will and he drops his gaze the moment the words leave his mouth. He doesn’t want to see the way Hannibal looks at him after saying something so vulnerable, much less see Matthew’s reaction.

“So you would do it to acknowledge my wants as superior to your own” says Hannibal and Will grits his teeth in frustration. “You do not consider that our positions may have evened out in recent weeks?”

“I’m the one on my knees.”

Hannibal slips the top of his trousers down, then the burgundy boxers underneath them, until the fabric rests across his thighs and his dick stands proud some inches above Will’s line of sight.

He kneels, body vertical from the knees up, rigid, in front of Will and his feet – still in smart black house shoes – laid out behind him.

“Look at me, Will.”

Will’s eyes scan upwards, across the white cotton of his shirt resting across his stomach, the speckles of stubble on his chin, his open mouth and his fierce eyes.

“Would you *like* –“

Hannibal’s voice stills as Will rests damp lips across the shining head of his cock. His tongue slides, softly, against the underside and it feels different, to when he did this with Matthew. He’s aware not just of needing something from Hannibal but of wanting to give himself, somehow. He wonders, loosely, if this is part of an apology. A way of moving past the agonies bestowed by betrayal and doubt.

“Will, you don’t have to…”

Will struggles to relax his throat; everything still faintly disconnected and his face is stinging the wider he opens his mouth. He perseveres, feels himself filling, feels useful, even. Like he’s proving something back to Hannibal. And to Matthew, if only out of spite.

“Your stitches” says Hannibal, and this is the first time he has ever sounded reluctant before the words have even left him. Hands push him back as Hannibal withdraws and sits back on his heels.

Will takes in a heavy breath and lifts a hand to wipe saliva from the side of his mouth.

“Please” he asks, quietly.

“I’d recommend being specific if you make any requests of me” says Hannibal, curling his hands through Will’s hair and standing up. “I could very well take that as a plea to be left in your current state with your extremities taped in place so you could nothing but suffer it.”

There’s a heavy splash of water as Matthew pulls himself out of the bath. His posture hints that he’s aware of his increasing redundancy in the current set up, shown by the way he scowls at the towel – the only one in the room – under Will’s knees. He moves to the door and Hannibal stands in his way.

“Please, Matthew,” says Hannibal through curled lips. “I cannot attend to you just yet. Stay.”

Will’s still looking at the floor and gathering his breath when he hears a thud of limbs folding against tiles. He twists round to see Hannibal arranging Matthew in a seated position with his chin resting on his chest.

“His high blood pressure makes intervening with his consciousness a surprisingly easy exercise” he explains, crossing the floor with only the smallest hindrance from his half-down pants.

Will’s elbows are folding under him and there is nothing keeping him here beyond a feeling of obligation to Hannibal and not knowing what else to do.

“Tell me what you wish to ask of me” says Hannibal, standing out of Will’s line of sight.

Will stutters on his breath and shifts on his knees

There are sensible things he wants to ask – not to be drugged the moment he’s inconvenient; where in the world they are right now; what he whispered to Matthew when he first appeared;

how safe he is – but he knows these wouldn't be answered at any pace other than Hannibal's, if at all.

"I want you to…touch me" says Will. It seems as close as he can get to expressing the need to have hands on his dick and all the tension wrung out of him by Hannibal's deft fingers.

Hannibal walks behind him and kneels, his legs positioned astride Will's. A hand strokes at his back, and presses sharp into the small of his spine. Will shakes, recoils, as nerves spasm through the muscle.

"I warned you about being specific" says Hannibal and Will curls his hands into fists.

"I want you to get me to come" says Will through hot short breaths. He omits the addition of "you pedantic, sadistic fuck."

"Better" says Hannibal, "though I'm not preventing you from doing it yourself."

Will can feel tears of frustration prickling his eyes.

"Don't…don't make me explain it to you" he says, leaning back, feeling the brush of Hannibal's erection against his skin.

"I worry that you are using your passivity as a way of denying your truest nature" says Hannibal, pulling back from Will. "That you are hoping circumstances will conspire to give you what you want without you having to acknowledge that the desire came from you."

"I'm telling you I want it" says Will.

Hannibal makes a discreet disappointed hum and dances his fingers warningly across Will's spine.

Realisation creeps slowly into being.

"You…you mean with Mason, and the others, don't you?"

"You refrained from killing him yourself. You let circumstances decide his fate, and in turn, your own."

"And this is why you're not letting me get off."

Will's not sure he meant the words to come out so bluntly.

"I believed that you regard intercourse and death in such close terms with each other that you'd appreciate the comparison" says Hannibal, leaning closer, nudging his cock against Will's skin.

"So the fact I wanted him dead and *chose* to let him burn…that doesn't count?"

"Not if you believe your actions to have been righteous in the way you view such things."

“His death was righteous. The methods, the…the circumstance…they led to the desired end.”

Hannibal punctuates his approval by spitting onto his right hand and massaging around where Will already feels too stretched, too open for so little contact.

“You understand how your dependence on external factors makes me wary of trusting that you are the person I wish you to be?”

“Goddamnit, Hannibal. Can you just…”

Hannibal stills.

“I’m not…I’m not the same as you.”

“That would certainly be dull for me if you were” agrees Hannibal, fingers hovering around Will the way they might dance across a Theremin.

“You let me slice you open” he says, one hand crawling up Will’s back and knotting itself in the curls above his neck. “You could have stopped me. Fought me. But you let me tear into you.”

“It seemed…” Will doesn’t want to say ‘just’. That suggests a consistency of reasoning and morality that has eluded everything about Hannibal. He’s not sure he can take any more psychoanalysis.

“Appropriate” he offers, and Hannibal answers him by pushing in. It’s controlled and violent; it’s a different kind of force to anything he’s felt from Matthew and he feels himself instinctively resisting it.

Fingers tug his head back until his throat is stretched taut.

“I think” says Hannibal, his voice low and wavering and it’s reassuring, hearing Hannibal subject to the same biological responses as a normal person, “that your inherent submissiveness may tell you more about yourself than you are perhaps prepared to acknowledge.”

“Please, Hannibal, just – can we do this without the… psychiatry?”

Hannibal pulls back and Will’s too empty, too frantic and if he could only reach himself without losing his balance…

Hannibal pushes again, burying himself inside Will with a grunt.

“I imagined I might savour such an event more” says Hannibal and he sounds wistful, distant. His thighs tremor and he rests fingers on the tip of Will’s full cock.

“Tell me,” he says, and Will’s vision spots and his neck aches and he can’t *breathe* and he just needs, *needs* more contact.

“Would you have let me kill you?” asks Hannibal.

*It feels like he's killing him now*.

Hannibal thrusts, pulls almost all the way out. Will coughs a small choke, showing Hannibal how he's not stopping him, even now with his breath almost out of him and his hands close enough to stop if he wanted to.

Fingers latch around Will's cock and Will's pushing into them, bucking back onto Hannibal and he's trying to be everywhere, feel everything all at once, all the pain and urgency and panic.

"Yes."

Hannibal shudders into him, through him, and with the smallest pressure from his fingers, he coaxes Will to release and to emptiness.

Will's limbs tremble under him and he feels himself dropping, then feels Hannibal's arms wrapping round him, scooping his chest and pulling him backward, into his lap.

"You never fail to present me with surprises" murmurs Hannibal, soothing the shake out of Will with warm hands.

"That's not always a good thing for me" says Will, unfolding his legs and letting the clear side of his face rest on Hannibal's shirt.

"This is why I hope to keep a closer eye on you" says Hannibal. "I should let you rest."

"You mean put me to rest?"

Hannibal pulls Will up with him as he stands, supporting him with near overbearing strength.

"Come, Will. To your room."

Will walks past Matthew's slumped shape on the tiles, legs unsteady and Hannibal's arm under his.

"No clean-up for me?" he asks, as Hannibal guides him through the door, onto the soft carpet of a corridor Will doesn't remember seeing and into a room with an outside lock on the door. *His* room. With its impersonal whites and soft bedding and no clear memory beyond water, spoon feeding and sleeping.

"You smell of me" says Hannibal, and it's only when Will's laid on the bed and the covers draped over him that he notices Hannibal's trousers still dropping off his hips.

"Sleep, Will."

Will flounders; wants to protest that he's barely been awake for any time at all, but some small flicker of movement and a sharp sting in his neck keep him quiet and his eyes fall closed.

- -

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading. There is still more to come, and it'll be even slower to update than I'd like because apparently, life outside of fiction is actually sometimes rubbish and full of inconveniences - but this is why we make the stories we do... x

# Wound

Chapter Notes

Someone read JG Ballard's Crash at a formative age. I'm sorry.

It’s a heavy sleep that catches Will, but he’s finding himself pulled in and out of it in waves; his temperature feels too high and the covers too heavy, before something soothes him and lets him fall back into the darkness. It’s the sort of sleep he’s used to, more than the soft cover of dreamless cloud he’s been immersed in since being under Hannibal’s care. It’s just that this way, with his nerves and jagged edges all slowly coming to life, this way, he dreams. And nothing offered to him by any Morpheus is ever kind.

The first touch he becomes aware of is gentle. It’s a hand smoothing down the covers, fingers stroking his damp hair.

“Rest” he is told.

Somewhere between lucidity and unconscious anxiety, he wants to obey the voice. Feels his limbs gaining weight and the covers sinking over him.

He feels comforted; like his body wants to relax and all it needs is the permission to do so.

The bedcovers shift from his legs and there’s a coldness to the air which prickles at the sore, burnt skin of his calves. Calmness leaves him in a breath and he’s tense; coiled and wanting to spring.

“Shh.”

Will kicks up; it’s instinctive and useless. Cold hands press his legs back into the bedsheet.

“So many horrors have been inflicted on you these past months” says Hannibal’s voice, “and so few of them from me.”

Will stares at the ceiling and understands that this is about ownership.

Hannibal’s tongue is rough on his leg; not quite like a dog’s, but there’s something familiar about it all the same. As Hannibal’s mouth traces the raises and indents of fire-singed skin, Will feels immobile. He’s meat, again. He has a pulse and no input beyond the lurching movement of blood threading through him. His hands won’t move and his voice is muted.

“Matthew wouldn’t understand this” says Hannibal, mouth warm and breath tickling at the hairs of Will’s legs as he moves up.

Will thinks of rats eating the freshly dead, and of the starting point they'd choose.

Hannibal pulls at Will's wrists, at the healing scabs, and bites the crust of skin, lapping at the pink skin they reveal.

"You wouldn't stop me if you could" he continues. Will says nothing; feels the unchanging pulse of his ventricles and accepts that this is something Hannibal needs from him.

"Your guilt wouldn't let you."

Hannibal's tongue in on his face now; damp and chaotic as it burrows into the gashes in his skin.

There's an echo of Hannibal talking about reclaiming horrors, of owning them. Will feels a lurching sickness and wonders what horrors from others he has to claim for himself.

"It's what you want; security and absolution," says Hannibal. "I wouldn't do this if you didn't need it."

His tongue flickers across bruises, across hairs on Will's chest and across abrasions and Will is dimly aware of his wrists being pinned by Hannibal's hands. It hardly seems necessary, but there's a comfort to the sensation. He still can't move his head or his voice and the ceiling is still white above him.

"Even this" says Hannibal into the torn line of Will's gut, "has worsened through causes not of my own making."

Will catches the sensory echoes of his gut being punched, of it twisting from fighting, from running and from fucking, and sees how this has given him the responsibility of his own injury and of its worsening. And he thinks that by healing it, Hannibal *should* consider this sufficient influence on its progress. And yet he knows that this is not enough for the doctor. It's not about healing. It's about so much control and Will finds himself willing to offer it.

"Such a wonder" whispers Hannibal, his mouth creeping back toward Will's face until he's close enough to block his view of the white above him. "Matthew wouldn't get this far under your skin."

A finger pulls at the edge of the scar and it feels like a parcel being unwrapped.

"Intimacy of this degree is not a thing I would choose to share with any other" says Hannibal and Will understands what he's about to do – and that Hannibal is sometimes human, and subject to such frivolous emotions as jealousy.

He's a toy that's been shared round the neighbourhood and now Hannibal wants to make sure he stays firmly in his possession.

The skin on his stomach splits wider and there's a heavy weight bearing on his chest and a hand stroking the indents of his face.

“This is what I mean when I fuck you” he says, and Will wishes he didn’t have to understand; he feels the pressure and the splitting of skin and the peeling and the burn of fresh pain firing up inside him.

There’s a pressure like fingertips on both sides of his face and a pressing, heavy force pushing inside his gut, working from the outside of the skin and pressing in.

“You understand” whispers Hannibal and he sounds so much like his conscience in his dreams.

Will understands.

The pressure inside his wound swells, surges, moves in and out of him with the same steady rhythm Will had felt in the bathroom.

Somehow, that Hannibal has chosen to fuck into the wound and not anywhere that Will could respond to; it makes sense.

There’s a slippery sound of organs being pushed aside and regrouping in tandem with the jerking in and out and for all there’s no logic to his reaction, Will can feel the muscles nearer his groin tensing and cloying for contact.

“Do you see?” asks Hannibal, sweat seeping from his hairline and a smell like completion manifesting in the air.

Will still has no voice to answer him. Sweat spits onto his forehead and onto his cheek and he has never felt so completely and utterly *claimed* as his insides move to Hannibal’s movements.

Thighs shake around him and he *knows* this feeling and he’s cursing his sleeping brain for supplying him so much detail, for not giving him reprieve, even in unconsciousness, from agony.

He tries to nod that he understands; feels his neck taut and rigid and feels Hannibal pulling out of him.

His vision grows darker as Hannibal climbs up him and there’s this weight on his chest, the proverbial nightmare keeping him pinned, and yet the fear it should bring is somehow absent.

Hannibal’s crotch comes into focus and it’s only now that Will realises Hannibal’s been naked this whole time; more revealing than he’s ever been in consciousness and this adds sincerity to his actions, somehow. There’s blood on him; on his cock and up to his stomach in smudges of shining red.

“Would you, if I asked you to?” asks Hannibal. He’s so close to Will’s face and Will knows what he’s asking. If he could take back some ownership of the misdeeds done to him by cleaning – by licking clean – the mess of Hannibal and somehow taking it back into himself. A bonding ritual, of sorts. He’s thinking of a snake swallowing its own tail and his head feels too hot. He’s trying to say yes, to nod, to open his mouth and *take it.* His jaw opens and he

can taste himself; sour, fluid, wretched and tainted somehow with something more potent than death. It's a taste that seeps into him and he urges himself to choke on it if only to deny the honesty of it.

His jaw relaxes as the pressure on his throat dissipates and for a breathless second he's scared that he's swallowed, *consumed* his nightmare in its entirety.

The image softens.

Hannibal retreats, whole and bloodied, and the pain quietens. There are fingers sifting through his hair now, wiping perspiration from his brow, and the smell of blood has thinned.

"Will."

Will feels his eyes opening, sees the ceiling above him and a blur of Hannibal's face; no sweat, and no urgent pain. He can move his neck, and his throat, and the slow transition to consciousness is more disconcerting than the fast jerk awake that he's used to.

"Will, you're awake right now. Can you hear me?"

Will leans into the contact of fingers in his hair before it occurs to him to pull away.

"I'm awake" he echoes dully and his voice moves easily through his throat. He moves his arms as much as he can and the contact from soft bindings on his wrists reminds him of his definite reality.

"You seem hot. Are you feeling unwell?" asks the doctor, and Will is faintly aware that some of the responses of his body from the dream have transcended through to his wakeful state.

"Or perhaps your sleeping thoughts are better left unexplored at this moment" continues Hannibal, amusement playing at the crevices of his face. Heat rises through Will's skin and something as simple as embarrassment is almost refreshing in Hannibal's company. He considers that he'd be afforded more privacy of reaction if both sides of his face had been mutilated; the blush stretching through him has always betrayed more of him than his words ever could.

"Rest, Will."

Will nods dumbly.

"We'll talk in a few hours, and I think it reasonable that you should be given opportunity for solid food. Until then, sleep."

- -

# Wake up

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will wakes after a more leaden sleep; no nightmares permeating it this time beyond a residual ache in his scar which seems fiercer, somehow.

There's light in the room; a soft haze filtered through white linen curtains and it's a wintery sort of light, as though spring has yet to reach whichever corner of the world they're holed up in. He wants to look outside; wants to place himself on a map and feel his feet on solid ground. His head is quick to unfog from the second round of sleep and he remembers that the last time, there was no thin needle in his neck or cloth in front of his face to speed up unconsciousness. With the waking of his mind comes the prickle of nerves and sting of his face; the soreness of his legs against sweat-weighted sheets and the residual chemical sting around his eyes.

He pulls at his wrists and at the soft wrappings latching them to the bed and fumbles for a catch, a knot or a clip to release them. There's nothing he can grab onto; it's a mess of cushioned fabric and his hands won't twist far enough to dismantle it. Typical of Hannibal's style, he imagines. He'd call out, but there's something novel about having his own space. It's a rare opportunity to feel unsupervised, even if he's pinned into place and at the mercy of the timing and wishes of others.

It's a kind of peace.

He's staring at the ceiling and assembling his thoughts; of how to leave the house when he finds out where it is, of how to slip from Matthew's ego-led urges and let him follow the macabre depths of his needs with Hannibal, leaving Will to escape to something unknown. Contacting those names given by the FBI and letting *them* do the rest of the catching. Turning the murderer in and hoping that the prize will somehow absolve him the destruction in his wake.

Dread sits heavy in his stomach at the idea and Will considers that it's not his own fate that scares him.

It's Hannibal's.

Will tries again to imagine freedom; of being away from this bed and the encompassing control that Hannibal has been imposing on him since they first met, and nothing happens. His imagined steps away from him end with him spiralling back on himself, walking into the path of the man he's supposed to be catching and doing less to escape him each time.

He's thinking again of a snake eating its tail.

He imagines the faces of those staff at the FBI; of Kade, of her supervisor and of the forensics team – he pictures Beverley with them and it doesn't sting, this time – and imagines their relief and vindication at the capture of the man who tore holes through their procedures and through them. There's no satisfaction in it. There's something so…ordinary about it.

None of them would understand.

Even Freddie with her insight and ghoulish lust for details and avenging – she wouldn't find solace in his retribution. She'd be flinging herself into the path of the next copycat, embroiling herself too closely in another person's story.

Alana would learn of it and would want it as nothing more than a footnote of a chapter she wants burned, and none of them would *have any idea what they were trying to contain*.

For them, it would be reductive. They'd be pinning everything Hannibal is, every one of his actions, to psychiatric definitions and opportunities for study. There'd be no elegance in it. It would be the ignorance of the Chiltons and the Kades magnified in a media shitstorm.

And somehow, considers Will, this seems more important to him than his naïve concepts of righteousness. Nothing Foucalt ever wrote about meting out societal justice could contain a person like Hannibal, but the world he occupies has an honesty that the man's horror reflects back on itself.

Will also considers that, for his opinion to have reverted to so much sympathy, he may still be under the influence of more chemicals than Hannibal would admit to having given him.

Or, just under the influence of Hannibal.

Somewhere at the periphery of his thoughts is an image of Jack, still lying in stasis as Bella crumbles beside him, and of Abigail; a startled cry, a potential and something so much more to Will than any of them could grasp. The idea of Hannibal experiencing retribution seems a little closer this time.

The ceiling looks clear; white.

There's a simplicity in the colour that Will wishes he could apply to himself.

Everything that sits behind the lids of his eyes is shaking, shades of dark and horror and no such thing as simple as 'escape'.

It's about molding himself into the safest position his circumstances will allow, and as he tugs again at the soft ties around his wrists, he's accepting that there's a certain comfort he can take from having his position dictated for him. That under Hannibal's…care, for want of a more accurate description, he's feeling more protected than he ever remembers.

The feeling of comfort is consolidated by a smell like warm butter, of meat, and it should be revolting, knowing where it comes from, but somehow, it makes Will think of home.

-

“You must be hungry.”

Hannibal’s entrance to the bedroom had gone unnoticed by Will, still hiding in reveries of thoughts more comfortable to him than the risks of his current reality.

Will nods and cannot remember a meal within the last haze of days that hadn’t been liquidised and administered by spoon.

Hannibal sits on the side of the bed, lifts the covers away from Will and unties the white wrappings keeping him tethered to the bed. He positions his hands in such a way as to obscure the location and style of knot; as though this is a secret he intends to keep using.

“You are aware that our current situation here is not desirable.”

It’s not posed as a question but Will replies in the affirmative.

He suspects that the things he finds troublesome about the situation are somewhat different to whatever Hannibal objects to.

“Sparing Matthew is a courtesy that his actions against me do not warrant” he says, moving to the other side of the bed to loosen the tie on Will’s left wrist. “But as you went to such lengths to retrieve him from his own poor circumstances, I believed you would appreciate the gesture.”

“Only you would refer to saving someone as a token of…etiquette” answers Will through dry lips, flexing his hands slowly, rubbing each pink, scab-less wrist in turn.

Hannibal regards him with a careful coldness.

“Your circulation would not have been hampered by my safety measurements.”

Will stares at Hannibal until he looks up. The air feels almost solid between them.

“*Would* not?” asks Will, not moving from the bed, unshielded by any blanket or clothes.

“Either you are choosing to exaggerate your discomfort in an attempt to discourage me from using such methods in future, which you should know is ineffectual…”

Will turns away from Hannibal, moving to sit up and placing his feet on the carpeted floor. It feels like security, and like the first morning he’s been allowed to wake up since the restaurant.

“…Or you have been pulling at them in your sleep, which only tells me that their necessity remains, along with curiosity as to *why*.”

That Hannibal isn’t certain forms a low thrill in the pit of Will’s stomach. As though he still has opportunity to create a game from his circumstance; to pretend that he still has his wits through the drugs and anxiety and the trap he’s in.

It takes him standing up to realise that he has no idea where his clothes are. If he has any that aren't shredded by fire and knives. There's no wardrobe in this room; no furniture beyond the bed and a small table with next to it. There are two doors; both have locks and one is the entrance that Hannibal emerged from. The carpet, curtains and bedding are all the same crisp white and it looks like a canvas waiting for some vision to be imposed on it.

Will's mind supplies a vision of arterial spray cascading the walls as a reprieve from the blandness and he takes a short moment to rebuke his subconscious.

"Do I have…clothes?" he asks, still refusing to look at Hannibal.

The pause between the question and Hannibal's answer generates a swell of worry in Will's gut as to the terms of his internment.

"Of course."

The way Hannibal says it, as if to chide Will for humouring such unruly doubts, it upsets the former optimism that he has a role to play of anything more than a riddle for Hannibal that has nearly been solved.

"The bathroom is unlocked" explains Hannibal and Will understands the purpose of the second door.

"I assume you will need a moment; I shall fetch your attire."

Will keeps his back to Hannibal and walks towards the bathroom. En suite. As if this were some sort of hotel and Will was merely a guest.

He hears a door lock as Hannibal leaves, and the idea that he's not trusted enough not to run from the building without clothing or direction makes him smile. And as the skin of his face splits with the action, the cause for smiling slips out of reach and he's confronted by his own sense of discreet despair. There's no mirror in this small bathroom; just a rectangle of a shower, a toilet and a sink. As his stomach lurches from the strain of pissing, Will feels more trapped by his personal physical limitations than by Hannibal's machinations, despite how the two are intricately linked. There's an intangible sadness to it; as though the turmoil he's accustomed to has a physical manifestation and now, it's wholly inescapable.

He washes his hands with new vigour but his skin remains the same and his fingers are still calloused and his wrists are still shining pink and there hardly seems any point to it.

"Your clothes are on the bed" calls Hannibal from outside the bedroom door, and there is no follow up sound of him leaving. Will shakes a long breath out of him and leaves the small white bathroom, skirting his eyes from Hannibal to the rich brown trousers, cream shirt and maple coloured socks that lie on the – already folded down – white bedding. There's a pair of mahogany-dark soft-soled house shoes at the foot of the bed.

"Yours were in no state to be salvaged" Hannibal explains somewhat pointlessly, looking at Will with a lack of discretion to his gaze that seems more intimidating than violence. It's a surveying sort of look.

Will does not question the absence of underwear and steps into the trousers, one hand on the wall to support him, the stretch and twist of the motion a practiced movement, and the ensuing tug of torn muscles becoming easier to endure and disguise with each repetition.

The fabric is heavy and soft; nothing like the durable garments Will would choose for himself, and it feels like an armour; just not like his own.

“I fear that a decision needs to be reached regarding Matthew. He may yet emerge as something magnificent.” says Hannibal, and though Will is facing away from him again, pulling the socks onto his feet, he can feel his stare like some hot angry thing on his back.

Will feels dread pulsing through him as forcefully as his own blood through his veins.

“But, you must be aware that my patience has its limitations” continues Hannibal.

“You put up with me, didn’t you?” says Will, reaching for the shirt and focusing intently on the button holes and the way that none of them have stray threads or overlapping stitching.

“Your potential is a many layered thing. Matthew’s is less focused than yours.”

Will views himself through Hannibal’s gaze as nothing more than an experiment. A tool for amusement.

“So as your projects, how are we shaping up?” asks Will, turning to face Hannibal as he tucks his shirt in.

“You both pose great risk to me, still” says Hannibal, hardness in his expression and his mouth set in a curl that threatens to turn feral with a whim. “But Matthew lacks control, and this presents a danger to you as well as me.”

“What about me?” asks Will. “Do I exhibit sufficient cont*rol* for you?” he asks carefully. It feels to him like he’s trying to barter for the other man’s safety and thoroughly jeopardise his own.

Hannibal’s eyes spark.

“Rather too much. You actively seek it from sources external to yourself. Repeatedly” he answers.

Will feels the flush rising in his cheek.

“Your painkillers, Will” says Hannibal, ever the expert at diversions in conversational direction. He gestures to the table by the bed, and the short glass of water and small gathering of tablets next to it. Will recognises the small white disc as dihydrocodeine, and the mustard yellow and olive green capsules as tramadol. The small pink disc next to them is new.

“Do I get to ask you what this is?” he asks, picking up the pills and the water.

“I would say to trust me, but this is a concept that neither of us is ready for. But believe that it is for your benefit.”

The temptation to discard the pink tablet seems futile as an act of rebellion, and Will finds his self-preservation instincts wavering. He swallows them all, chasing them with water and ignoring the contentedness of Hannibal’s smile.

“Come. You need to eat.”

Chapter End Notes

This is going to hell: there are at least 3 more chapters to come and the one that's currently being edited is...cruel, at best. I don't know *how* it's going, but I know *where* it's going, and... I mean it; I'm sorry.
So much love to you for reading - this is giving me life!

# Appetiser

Chapter Notes

> I'm trying to speed up the next update; the promised imminent cruelty seems to be spanning more pages than will comfortably fit in in one update. Apologies will soon become redundant so I'll leave them out for now...
> I am pretty overwhelmed by the feedback so far - thank you, so much, you excellent people!

The whole of the dining area smells like a gift. Will finds himself less repulsed by the idea that it's meat, and that meat cooked by Hannibal is a thing to be fearful of where morality is concerned. He's sat opposite Matthew, wrists resting on an embroidered white cloth covering a solid oak table. They're both eyeing the place set for Hannibal at the head as though waiting for prompts. There's more colour and texture in this room than he's used to seeing; a burgundy curtain covers a wide patio window and bleak landscapes fill gilt frames around the olive dining area. It doesn't look like Hannibal's taste, and the mystery of where they are is no closer to being solved.

"I guess we're here to work out our differences" comments Matthew, visibly frustrated by the enforced etiquette that appears to have been demanded of him. He's twitching with the energy of a boy stuck in Sunday school and his eyes are flashing murder. Will wonders what drugs have been filtered into him since he got here.

"I'm not sure our *differences* need any working on" says Will, half focussed on the sound of plates and surfaces from the adjacent kitchen. He's not sure when he started viewing Matthew as an irritation more than as a person and does not consider how easily he's assuming Hannibal's vantage point.

"You're acting awfully superior, Mr Graham" says Matthew, fidgeting with the cuffs of his white shirt like it's another uniform he's resentful of having to wear. "Not sure you're in a position to play the upper hand."

"This is nothing to do with pissing contests" says Will, willing back the one-sided flush rising in his face. "I imagine we're here to weigh out the quotas of guilt and forgiveness between us."

There's a hopeful edge to Will's voice which he'd been hoping to suppress. The intensifying smell of heat and cooking flesh forces an anticipatory gurgle through his gut and it's hard to

focus on Matthew through the gaping feel of hunger expanding in him.

“Guilt’s your area” says Matthew, fingers moving over the knife as though its smooth buttering edge could pose any kind of threat. “Are you asking for my for*give*ness?” he asks, as though he doesn’t understand the word.

Will rests his fingers on a fork. At least this implement has points that could push through skin at the right angle and with enough force.

He wants to be cautious with his words but they blurt out of him like ink from a snapped pen.

“So you’re choosing to ignore the fact you wanted to send Mason’s people –”

“You used to be more careful with how to get what you wanted out of people” interrupts Matthew. “You’re stuck on this idea that I should be loyal – I’m not one of your dogs, Graham.”

“Be easier to heel if you were” mutters Will, sourness curling his face and his skin stinging with the movement.

“Oh, come *on*.”

Will stares, waiting for the coldness of Matthew’s eyes to meet his.

“What?” asks Will through closed teeth.

“You feel bad about what *you* did” says Matthew, “and you’re trying to pretend like this is just an imbalance that can be fixed if you act big enough.”

The noise from the kitchen quietens.

“That’s not –”

“But you’re not big at all, magpie. You just impersonate big.”

Hannibal’s outline emerges from the doorway to the kitchen, three plates balanced between his forearms and hands.

“Hannibal was right” smiles Matthew as a warm plate is placed in front of him, wisps of steam rising from the shades of ornamental food.

“I like to think so” smiles Hannibal, serenity obviating the murderous tension in the room. “But before I ask for elaboration, this is a dish best enjoyed at a warm temperature.”

And just like that, the three of them fall into the construct of civility.

The food is simple, by Hannibal’s standards; peppered asparagus with artichoke hearts and shredded lemongrass, next to a fleshy vegetable that looks like aubergine but is crusted with flakes of something golden and brittle, and then there’s the meat. The shape and smell of it is obscured by swirls of a textured red sauce which smells – tastes – like honeyed pepper and

nothing about the combination of flavours should work, but at the first mouthful Will finds himself admiring it in the way he used to revere things as simple as a warm smile directed at him.

“So, who are we eating?”

It’s Matthew, the first to break protocol.

A look of fierce disgust skims the edges of Hannibal’s expression before his face reverts to a cold smiling calm.

“Please, Matthew. I would only answer if I believed it would enhance the enjoyment of the dish. And in this case I believe it to be a triviality.”

Will expects the meat in his throat to catch; to revolt him in some way as the admission of its source sits with no deniability to disguise it.

It doesn’t, and he finds himself arranging the next mouthful on his fork.

He puts it down to hunger and avoids adding to the conversation.

“So how long are we staying here, Dr Lecter?”

There’s still food in Matthew’s mouth as he speaks and Will is wondering if the atrocity of his manners is a cultivated attempt to raise a reaction, or whether it’s how he’s always been. He thinks back to the cold meals they ate in their hotel room, to the inhaled cups of coffee and the impatience that colours everything about him, and decides it’s just how he is.

Hannibal finishes chewing before offering an answer.

“That depends entirely on you. And on how efficiently you are able to remedy the uncomfortable situation between yourself and Will.”

There’s a knot in Will’s stomach that twists more tightly than the sliced muscles around it.

The earlier conversation about Matthew’s potential now has a horrible urgency to it as Hannibal’s words capture Matthew’s rapt attention. There’s a sliver of artichoke that’s nestling into the lining of Will’s throat as he swallows and he’s cursing every dose of tramadol he’s ever swallowed for the way it’s not letting his thoughts align in a way that might offer him strategy or retaliation.

The fragments of earlier warnings; of Matthew denying that Will had any more right to survival than him, of Hannibal’s assertions that trust was a forgotten tool between them, of his own fatalistic approach to existing; they’re converging on him now as his meal grows cold and heavy inside him and cool eyes rest on him the way hunters view deer through forest greens.

“I think he can be handled efficiently” says Matthew, and Will’s hoping that this is misdirection, somehow. His left hand grips onto the handle of his fork and he swallows the panic rising in him.

“You’re not one for doing things neatly, Matthew” says Will, not knowing entirely what he means but needing to feel as though he is retaliating in some way.

“Come. I did not mean that this situation was to be resolved imminently. There is still dessert to follow” offers Hannibal.

He’s curating, again.

Matthew slices the meat on his plate and as he puts it to his mouth, he angles his gaze on Will, grinding the food between his teeth. It’s an easy threat to make, in the circumstances. Hannibal’s gaze follows Matthew’s, and with them both chewing, Will follows their lead. He’s reminded of church and the crass symbolism behind consuming emblems of the body, only this time he’s wondering how willing Christ ever was in the whole ritual.

Then he finds himself wondering if Jesus ever got to a point where he’d given up on wanting to save people instead of leaving them to suffer, and to hell with crucifixion or higher purposes.

And then he worries that he’s starting to understand Hannibal’s divine egotism more intimately than he’s accustomed to.

“Nourishment hastens recovery” says Hannibal, and though he’s not looking at Will’s plate as he speaks, focused instead on the glimmering, expanding whites of Matthew’s eyes, Will feels the admonishment. He swallows fresh mouthfuls, chewing carefully and feeling the flavours muting into the familiar ash that comes with a slow mounting terror climbing up through his gullet.

There doesn’t seem to be a lot of point in recovering.

Will’s plate is finally empty as Hannibal clears the crockery from the table and pauses for a long second to rest his hand on Will’s shoulder before scooping up his plate.

Will’s not sure if it’s a gesture of faith or if it’s his doctoring profession attempting to offer consolation of the inevitable. Neither seems reassuring and his shoulders are twisted into knots.

“Matthew, if you would be so kind as to assist me with dessert? I’m afraid it has more layers to it than I can transport in one trip.”

Will blinks as a way of levelling himself and considers his options.

The cutlery round the table is poor weaponry and the curtain over the door is undoubtedly obscuring locks and safety glass that Will has no immediate way to overcome.

The heaviness of his senses from the medication supplies him with another option; the one that hides on the hinges of most of his decisions. The weariness and comprehension of futility in the face of so much vicious focus. The idea that at some point, he can just lay back. Let whatever needs to happen transpire.

He’s wondering which bit of him Hannibal would cook.

His brain, he thinks, has always been the lure. It makes sense that he'd take that part first; slice it into Hirst-like displays, drizzle it with some delicate sauce and serve it up with some fruit he can't even pronounce the name of.

He finds himself wondering how he'd die if Matthew killed him, instead.

His knuckles are wrapped tight around the handle of the fork as he plays scenarios behind his closed eyes.

Matthew would attempt something grandiose, he thinks, but lacking in poetry. It would border on pomposity. It would be a performance, made for Matthew's own sense of dramatic importance. There would be blood; copious amounts of it, and Matthew would ensure that it was eked out as payment for his own sense of need. As a sound of china meeting worktops rattles through his thoughts, Will considers that Matthew would draw some eroticism out of the event. Would prove that he was the winner once and for all. And, as a tightness pulls through his skin, Will thinks that he might prefer this outcome. That it would provide some final, tangible outlet for the guilt that encompasses his every sense of being. He finds himself wondering if his grudging affection for the man would let him balance things out, this way, and he suspects that there's always been a kind of inevitability to whatever outcome awaits him.

The noises from the kitchen quieten and Hannibal looms in the doorway, face like an unsolved puzzle. Any value Will may have put on himself as special, somehow…he's increasingly convinced that it was misplaced. He's dining with wolves, and without the conviction of his own beliefs, he's no longer hunter. He's prey and he's bait and *this is what he's always been*.

"Raspberry melange with –"

Hannibal's voice cuts off as quickly as it materialises, as a white plate loaded with shades of cerise and cream swings into his jugular.

"I figured we weren't gonna get to talk properly otherwise" says Matthew, as Hannibal folds inelegantly into the back wall of the dining room. "Plus, you know, revenge."

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# Feast

Chapter Notes

Warnings here for increasingly confused and overwhelmingly dubious consent...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Folded in an unconscious pile of limbs, it's the most casual that Hannibal has ever appeared in Will's presence. He wonders why this thought is taking precedence over his reaction to the fact that he's sitting immobile, at the dining table as Matthew stalks toward him.

Matthew exhibits a predictable lack of subtlety as he wraps cold fingers across the back of Will's neck.

"We've had a lot of conversations about you" he says and his breath smells milky.

"I can only imagine what was said" says Will. His left hand is still on the fork but the inclination to use it is weaker than the compulsion to see where Matthew is prepared to take this. He's considering that his nervous detachment from the situation may be related to the unmarked tablet fed to him prior to the meal. He feels heavy; nervous and useless.

"Apparently, you need help exorcising your *guilt*" says Matthew, and he's saying it in that distant way that suggests he doesn't fully grasp the weight behind the words he's reciting.

"And you need help with your self-control" says Will, pushing his chair back enough to shunt Matthew back and loosen the cold touch around his neck. He's round the table and checking Hannibal's pulse, resting his hand below his nose to check for the thin huff of breath, before Matthew catches up to him.

"Saviour complex not quite left you, has it?" says Matthew. He sounds insincere when he's trying to be cruel. Will is laying Hannibal on his side and keeping a clear path for his breathing in the automatic way he's known since he was a kid, and Matthew's behind him, pulling him upright and away from Hannibal with sharp fingers digging into his arms.

"Nuh uh. Worry about you, not him. I'll deal with you both."

It takes a second for Will to regret not carrying the fork across the room with him before he feels its prongs scraping the back of his neck.

"Get on the table."

“Matthew –“

The tines of the fork press up into the soft skin beneath the base of his skull. It’s a small threat, but a valid one. Will finds himself slower to calculate a retaliation; he has his hands free and could duck down to ground level, could kick a chair out behind him and upend Matthew that way. It’s just that every movement he plans has an inevitability of agony to it and it’s *exhausting*. He feels the fight slowly rising in him as a reflex and follows his grudging intuition, ducking his head down and pulling his weight away from Matthew.

An elbow jabs into his shoulder blade and he drops. He’s kicking his legs out behind him and Matthew’s dodging him too easily, like Will is only playing at self-defence.

“Climb up on the table,” says Matthew, leaning his weight over where Will is sprawled and pulling him up by the shoulders, “or I knock you out and drag you up there.”

Will considers that whenever people give him ultimatums, he’s usually faster to supply the third option; the one which has him shirking the demands that don’t suit him. It’s just that, since Hannibal, he’s been letting himself get pinned more easily.

“Come on.”

There’s a sound of crashing steel and porcelain as Matthew yanks the tablecloth and its contents on top of them. Will arches his hands above his head to protect himself from falling cutlery and ceramic.

“The more you cooperate, the better this will go” says Matthew and he’s speaking in his orderly voice again. It’s soothing, encouraging, and it sounds like Matthew’s play-acting at levels of control that the rest of his nature hasn’t caught up to yet. It doesn’t feel *real*.

There’s a sound of the tablecloth being sliced and then torn along the weave, and the folds of fabric are landing on the back of Will’s neck, over his back and down to where Matthew is straddling Will at the waist. There’s a burn of pain across his spine from the pressure and it’s gratifying, to know that he can still discern which bits of him aren’t working, rather than just feeling that the pain is a lumpen beast which occupies the entirety of his skin.

“Okay” says Will to the floor as more fabric is torn and puddles around the periphery of his vision.

There are two more rips before Matthew answers by climbing off and pulling him upright. He pulls at the collar of Will’s shirt, yanks, and spills buttons. Will silently shakes the sleeves off his shoulders, letting Matthew pull it away from him, and sits himself on the edge of the table.

Everything Matthew’s doing is a desecration of the elegance that defines Hannibal. It’s meant as an act of dominance, Will supposes, but as with everything Matthew does, it’s tainted by petulance.

The smile on Matthew’s face isn’t the smirk Will’s used to seeing; it’s a beaky, proud smile. It contains adoration; the same expression he’d gifted back in Baltimore when he’d viewed

Will with so much reverence and Will considers that it's a smile that suggests achievement. That whatever Will is to him now, or whatever he's about to become for him, it's something Matthew's been seeking for longer than Will was ever aware of.

Will doesn't humour the idea that whatever Matthew wants right now is partnership, anymore.

"Lie down."

What Matthew wants from him is a trophy. And with Hannibal in the room, will suspects that he's only the warm-up prize. The silver to Hannibal's gold.

He's a testing ground, of sorts.

It's occurring to Will now, as he's swinging his legs onto the bare oak of the table and leaning back, that he's not ready to be a trophy, and that the thoughts he's having of giving in are more a learned behaviour relating not to a death wish, but to the ways he allowed – *wanted* – Matthew to fuck him. He's not sure that it's smart to start getting his thoughts about the two confused right now. And as Matthew steers his shoulders down so they're resting on the table's edge, he has an echo of Hannibal reminding him that really, the principles are the same.

Matthew pulls Will's shoulders a little further from the table's edge, so his head is unsupported and he has to grip the side of the table for balance.

"You make a move against me and I knock you out. Okay?"

From the sound of low breathing from the corner of the room where Hannibal is still unconscious, Will deduces that he doesn't want to risk being unaware of what's happening to him. He's had too many lapses in cognitive function and he wonders if this way, awake, he can compare this to being in the dentist's chair.

The idea doesn't reassure him.

"Okay."

Matthew dips out of view and returns a second later with a length of the torn white tablecloth. He weaves it across Will's right wrist, sliding a finger between the fabric and skin and knotting it twice.

Will tries to guess at whether the care he's taking is for preservation purposes, or whether it's just habit.

Matthew loops the free length of the cloth around the middle table leg, so that there's enough tautness for support, but not enough to pull the fabric wrapping too tight.

Will finds himself admiring the meticulousness of the improvised construction and then wonders why he's not more concerned about what this means for him. There's the beginning of an itch by the stitches on his face and while he anticipates being distracted from it soon

enough, he takes advantage of the ability to move his left hand and reaches up – carefully, not in a way that could be read as defensive – to scratch at it.

The retaliatory smack from Matthew is excessive and leaves his face stinging and knuckles smarting.

“I warned you” says Matthew softly, pulling another strip of fabric across the offending wrist. He pulls this one tight, but reneges and works some give into the bind as he secures the knots.

He’s still impulsive. Reactive.

This means he can be coaxed into actions beyond whatever he’s got planned.

Will’s shoulders are already aching with the strain of supporting his head and it’s hard to see Matthew as he moves toward the foot of the table.

There’s a pause and a fumble and Matthew’s fingers unhook the fastenings of Will’s trousers. Instinct has Will tugging at the ties on his wrist, but there’s not nearly enough give for it to have any effect and his hands rest at the sides of the table.

Matthew is smiling as he pulls the fabric down and Will realises that he’s arching off the table to speed the removal before he can question why he’s trying to make this easier. He’s supposed to be better at games and manipulation, and this still feels like play.

The hands on his calves are cool, soft against the burnt skin as Matthew pulls the shoes and socks from his feet.

“That’ll make some scars” he smiles, like he’s trying not to be repulsed by the damage there. Or like he’s trying to claim ownership of these ones; being the one to beckon Will back into the fire that caused them.

“Seems I’m getting quite the collection” says Will.

Matthew smiles wider and wraps his hands round the skin of Will’s ankles, as though smoothing down the raised bumps of skin. He loops fabric around them and hitches each ankle to a table leg, securing each in turn with a new run of knots.

“You shouldn’t pull against these ones” he says. “It’ll hurt.”

“Sure.”

“You feeling secure?”

“Secure is a relative term” answers Will. “I’m not about to fall off, if that’s what you meant.”

More fabric is pulled from the floor and Matthew stalks to where Hannibal is arranged on the ground. Will can just make out the movements of Matthew heaving his shape across carpet and securing his wrists to the same table leg that Will’s left ankle is tethered to. The expected reaction; that Hannibal is somehow faking his current state and is merely waiting for the right moment to strike; it doesn’t come. Will can’t see any more beyond his own bare feet and the

thick edge of the table.  He assesses his ability to move. Beyond the strain in his neck and a capacity to shift his torso in tiny increments across the wood, there's no give.

This is starting to feel uncomfortably real.

Matthew walks back to the head of the table. His movements have the same nervy impulses jerking through him that they have when he's thrilling at a death tableau, or he's getting ready to drive his dick into someone needy and compliant.

"You can let your head fall back" says Matthew, fingers skimming Will's scalp through his hair. "That was the idea with this."

Will feels a rush of blood to his skull and an unfurling of nerves in his shoulders as he regards the room from his new vantage point.

"Tell me what it is you feel so guilty about" he asks, as Will's ears hum with blood.

"You're a poor psychiatrist, Matthew."

Matthew smacks the uncut side of his face with the back of his hand before the last syllable is out.

Will is reassured by how little the table moves when he jerks against it and wonders how his definition of stability got so confused.

"Tell me" says Matthew, sifting calmness back into the angles of his voice, "what you're sorry for."

Will raises his head back up. It's hard to think when there's an audible pulse running through his brain.

Matthew wraps a hand over his chin and pushes him back down.

"You want me to say I'm sorry I watched you get knifed" he says to the upside down view of Matthew's charcoal trousers and the poorly concealed beginnings of an erection.

"I want you to *be* sorry, but that's not it."

"You can't coax regret out of a person this way" says Will, words moving awkwardly out of his stretched throat.

"I probably can, but you have this way of underestimating me, Mr Graham."

"You make me sound like your teacher when you call me that" says Will and his mouth feels dryer with each word.

"Or like someone distant, maybe?" says Matthew, and Will raises his head up because the words sound hurt, and he wants to see if the expression on his beady faces matches them.

This time, Matthew pushes Will back down with the palm of his hand moving too fast and Will cries out before he can stop himself.

“Proximity was hardly the –”

“You find it awfully easy to lie, Mr Graham. Maybe, *maybe,* consider that your determination to alienate everyone comes from a – a deep mistrust in your own self.”

“It was more about self-preservation” offers Will, dizziness spilling through him.

“No. Self-annihilation.”

Matthew’s voice moves away and then there’s a sound of metal scraping metal.

“No” says Will and it’s less denial than it is a plea.

“You have a compulsion to lose” says Matthew, and something cold rests against the top of Will’s chest. “And I think it’s because you’re scared to accept what you’d be responsible for if you took charge of things.”

“Please –”

“So I’m showing you why it’s an idiot move, doing it the way you do. This is…proof. That not only are *you* the one who –”

“Please stop trying to psycho –”

Will’s voice stops as Matthew dips the knife into the top layer of dermis, then lower. The blade tracks down across the join of his rib cage, even and steady.

“You should have been fighting back” says Matthew to the backdrop of Will’s shaking breath.

“I can’t fight like this.”

His voice is more of a whisper, cracking through each word.

“And yet you *let* me put you here.”

Matthew tracks the knife down the inside of Will’s right arm; a shallow incision, angled for drama and for the blood it will spill rather than damage to the network of veins inside it. There’s a lack of congruity between what Matthew’s saying and what he’s doing.

“What do you gain by doing this?” asks Will, hissing at a fresh sting of metal in his skin.

“Reclaiming. This would have been so much better if we could have shared it” says Matthew.

Warm, damp lips rest across the sting in Will’s arm.

Will wonders if he could have found a way to enjoy this, in other circumstances. And he wonders if he can still find a way to embrace the violence of it, now. The Matthew doing this

to him in this moment is no different to any other incarnation of him he's experienced, and the brutality has an honesty to it that their other interactions often lacked.

"If you'd only put enough value in you…" muses Matthew, and Will's imagining what the blood on his mouth must look like.

"…You could have seen what there was in other people. Other people *valuing* you. You keep wasting it, ignoring the good things, because you don't *believe* in who you are."

"I don't see how this is asserting my sense of self-worth" says Will tentatively, blinking the swell of moisture from his eyes.

Matthew's words still don't sound like they belong to him and he's wondering how many conversations he's had with Hannibal since they got here. His head feels heavy and there's cold metal against his left ankle, just above the cloth. It soothes the hum of heat from the burns, until it doesn't.

Will feels blood drizzle out of him and the skin is sending confusing signals; it feels like anything between a torrent and a slow seep. He lifts his head up again; just to see if his life is about to spill out of him by the ankles.

There's only a thin trail of blood and there's a calmness to Matthew's expression as he assesses the flow from Will's calf to the base of the table, as though he can only reach a natural state of being when he's like this. Will watches Matthew slicing a valley into the oak to direct the delicate trail to where Hannibal is resting beneath it. He grits his teeth as Matthew places the knife into the open cut and slices again, thickening the flow.

There's too much strain on Will's wrists from pulling himself up but it's worth it to see that what Matthew's doing to him is still only surface deep. There are small globs of red forming on his arms and chest, trickling down him in stripes and it's nothing that won't heal. If he's given the chance to survive this.

Matthew wipes the steel blade of the chopping knife on the shredded tablecloth.

"Back down, Mr Graham."

Will lets his head tilt back, tensing as the knife makes a mirror of his wounds on his right calf, swallowing the need to cry out.

"Symmetry is important."

Will swallows his breath and adjusts to the new sharpness of pain, tugging against his bonds and feeling secured by how little he's able to move.

The difference between what Matthew's doing to him now and the things Matthew used to do him still feels small, somehow. As though the blood that colours the present is only the proof of what was always happening.

"But we don't have that anymore, do we?"

“There was never a symmetry to how we do things” says Will, and he’s having to tense and tighten the muscles of his neck to keep the air and the blood flow from getting caught. “There’s a…a see-saw. A balancing act that was never balanced.”

Matthew’s hands creep up past Will’s knees and they’re damp.

“You always see it in such cold terms” says Matthew. “Hannibal’s right, you know?”

Will sees white speckles creeping into his vision.

“Stop trying to appeal to Hannibal’s vanity. He can’t hear you.”

Will’s speaking as a way of testing his consciousness.

“There’s no point” he adds.

Matthew kneads at the inside of his thighs and Will wants to look again, if only to see how the blood is colouring his skin and wondering how little flesh he has left that is unmarred.

“You have a real problem with honesty, Will.”

Matthew sounds as reverent as he does cruel. Wet fingers toy at his groin.

“This…this is honest, though.”

Will closes his eyes as though it could shut Matthew’s voice out, still suffering the trite observations and desperately ignoring his body’s responses as fingers work around his balls.

“No. This is…this is biological reaction.”

The contact leaves his skin for a beat, then a smack lands heavy across his chest.

“This is what I mean” says Matthew, anger tilting the pitch of his voice. “You’re blaming everything on something outside of you. You’re putting yourself in these places where you always end up…*losing*, like you’re trying to punish yourself for what you should be celebrating...”

Matthew’s hands find their way back to the solidifying mass of Will’s cock and it’s less like stroking, more like dragging life into him with bloody-minded determination.

“Tell me you don’t want this” says Matthew and he sounds obvious again, not like the mouthpiece for Hannibal’s discussions with him behind locked doors. “Tell me you hate this, that you’re not getting off on having someone else take over.”

Will can’t find a way to dispute what Matthew’s saying with any degree of sincerity. Not even with the pain and the eked out panic and the farcical nature of everything that’s happening.

He wants to disagree – on principle alone, he wants to be able to shut Matthew down and tell him to stop acting out so much – and yet there’s so much of him that feels validated this way.

“You keep looking for…for per*mission* to do what you do, and you dress it up with morality and fancy metaphors” says Matthew. “You probably cry when you masturbate because you can’t admit to wanting that too.”

Will laughs, cold and pained.

“I wasn’t raised *catholic*, Matthew.”

Will raises his head again to see Matthew baring his red-flecked teeth. He leans back as Matthew wets a hand in the blood pooling around Will’s ankles and he screams when Matthew pushes a finger into him.

“I know you’re more than you let on” says Matthew and he pushes another finger in, waits for Will to relax around it and strokes at his dick with the other hand. “You’d have figured that out, eventually. But I can’t wait for that.”

Will can’t distinguish between his anger at Matthew for trying to reduce him to pithy stereotypes and his anger at himself for not having the cognitive presence to argue. He’s given up on the anger at how his body is throwing itself fully into the physical reactions Matthew’s drawing out of him; his body will always do this to him and he will always find some way to welcome it. He’s almost impressed that Matthew’s managing to take it as far as he is.

“Admit who you are” says Matthew, and he manipulates Will with a more careful dexterity, pushing another finger and massaging from the inside and out.

There’s nothing for Will to say in response; he *knows* who he is and this has nothing to do with the coiling, spiralling *want* that’s coursing through him, in the same way it has nothing to do with how his body is split and breaking and hurting, and how the two things are always working in tandem with each other.

Matthew’s mouth is on the flesh of Will’s hip, suckered there like a limpet and it’s not clear if it’s a kiss or a bite and it doesn’t seem to matter as he thumbs closer toward the head, grips and surges.

Will’s thoughts are closer to death when he tugs at his wrists, feels himself pinned, immobile and powerless and bleeding; the roar of his own circulation contracts and spasms inside him and he feels it spilling, leaving him like an expulsion of his own mortality.

Matthew is silent as Will lightens his breathing and lets the shudders fall from his limbs.

The tethers immediately feel too tight and the pain from fresh cuts sings rapidly into being and there’s an encroaching sense of the short lived euphoria being wholly deceptive.

Matthew moves so he’s by Will’s head and he strokes at his hair, at his shoulders,

“Shh.”

Will hadn’t realised he was making a noise that warranted quietening, but there’s a plaintive echo in the room that scratches through his throat.

“You feeling okay?” asks Matthew, and this seems an inappropriate question to be asking in the circumstance.

Matthew crouches on the ground and kisses, soft and reverent on Will’s brow.

“You never let this part happen” he tells Will, and he’s cradling Will’s head, thumbing the indents of his collarbones. “Only when you were starved of touch in the hospital, and even then you turned it into… strategy.”

“Sentimentality doesn’t suit you” murmurs Will.

Matthew’s touch turns brittle.

“Fair. But you see what I’m getting at?”

“Comfort is not something I can readily accept in most situations.”

Will pulls at the knots for emphasis and feels the table shift by the smallest degree.

“But you’ll let me do this to you instead” says Matthew, standing so that for a half second, the strain of his erection is parallel to Will’s line of sight, pushing against the fabric of trousers and brushing Will’s forehead as he moves.

Will can’t see the knife; instead he feels it pressing into the same gulley of his chest as before and it feels like an autopsy. He’s hissing and he’s calling out and Matthew kisses at the base of the incision and Will can tell it’s his mouth that’s damp there because his blood feels cold on his skin and Matthew is warm.

“Stop it” he’s saying to the wall and his head feels too laden with confusion to lift and he’s wondering how long it would take to suffocate at this angle.

“Relax” Matthew tells him and his hands are back around his head again, only they’re not just decorated by Will’s blood; they’re coated in it.

Will finds it harder to focus; the skin he’s in feels like fragments, all torn and barely able to contain him. In the blur of his vision, he sees trousers shuffling from Matthew’s hips and sees the too-close shape of him, prouder than he’s stood since Will’s known him.

“Tilt your head” says Matthew. He’s got one hand stroking at the side of Will’s neck and in the other, Will can make out a sheen of silver streaked with red.

Will sees no alternative to the inevitable and opens his mouth.

“I figure you don’t need the threat” says Matthew, voice thinning, “but then I figure you’d appreciate it all the same.”

The silver of the knife rests against the other side of Will’s neck and he feels a jolt through his stomach at the contact. Even through everything he’s been put through, everything he’s done, there’s still that low thrill that he can never suppress, no matter how hard he tries. It’s a pivot between living and not living, between deciding and not.

Matthew pushes himself into Will's mouth without ceremony and the angle is such that Will's throat is a straight-running tunnel. It's contracting; juddering and choking as Will evens out his breathing; pulls oxygen into him through his nose, nestled into the crook of Matthew's dropped pants.

"This is…" Matthew can't finish his sentence. His voice thins to a hiss and he's caught by the way Will is controlling the muscles of his throat; to the point that his tongue is barely given opportunity to move.

For Will, this feels like a gift to Matthew, whether it's earned or not. It's an understanding; that beyond the accusations and talk of apology and Matthew's terrible psychology, this is the only way Will can tell him that he gets it, really he does; that for everything they might have been to each other, that at this point, Will doesn't *mind* being this for him. And if Matthew could understand that, maybe Matthew wouldn't put so much *frustration* behind his efforts to hurt him.

If Will could talk, he'd tell Matthew that right now, gulping his muscles into control against the surge and withdrawal, embedded in the dark sweat, and straining against the ties holding him in place; right now, he's being *honest*.

Matthew's gasping, birdlike and panicked and he's stilling, like he's trying to prolong this.

Will wonders if this is a way of saying goodbye.

The knife at his neck scrapes at the skin and it's high enough up that Matthew would be risking himself as much as Will if he sliced in.

The table shifts again and Will's blinking back a sting in his eyes from sweat and involuntary tears and no way to resolve it.

Matthew cries out and the metal withdraws from the veins in his neck. Matthew's still inside him but the timbre has shifted and Will feels *jammed*.

Will is choking, slow and wretched, and his red raw chest is heaving. It feels like drowning until Matthew pulls out and hands are on his skin, calming him and reminding him how to inhale and it takes a moment to register that it's not Matthew's voice he's hearing.

Will strains to look up but there's nothing but fabric and skin and wiry hair and sweat.

"Will. Remember where you are."

It's *Hannibal's* voice and it's crisp and clear and not like the voice of someone who's only recently risen from a concussive blow.

Will tries to say that placing himself in the present moment is no source of comfort but there's too much scratch in his throat to make the words.

“Can you breathe?” asks Hannibal and Will can’t tell whose hands are where, from the fingers on his face to the touch on his arms and the pressure on his chest, but his breaths are moving more evenly through him.

“Yes” he manages.

“Matthew will –“

“How’d you get out?” demands Matthew and the touch on Will’s arms turns into a grip.

“When one is familiar with predicaments, one finds ways to pre-empt them and interfere with their execution” says Hannibal’s low voice. “Assuming one wants to escape, of course.”

“You’ve been…”

Will wants to say *awake this whole time, waiting*, but even if he can get the words out, he’ll have to understand what they mean.

“Matthew.”

Hannibal’s voice carries more authority in the two syllables than Matthew’s ever managed and Will shudders down the length of his body.

“We talked of you claiming what you perceive as rightly yours. You have not finished.”

“I –”

Will’s not used to hearing Matthew flounder.

“You will continue” says Hannibal, a pitch lower, and the tremble in Will’s skin grows. “And I will claim what is mine. Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s…”

Matthew pushes himself into Will’s throat, and it’s more hesitant and Will’s struggling to overcome the instinct to retch around him, feeling less charitable with his submission but still intrinsically eager. He supposes the intention to preserve the stitches on his face is no longer relevant as his skin stretches and it feels like he’s snapping.

The tethers on his ankles are cut from the table and his heels skid against the wet wood as he steadies himself, calming his breathing so that the thin stream of air can make it through his nostrils unobstructed by panic. There’s a feeling blooming in him like hysteria, like a sob or a scream that won’t emerge, and his knees are being pushed up, apart. The table shifts under a new weight and there’s stiff fabric against Will’s skin, then there’s hair and warm breath. Matthew’s fucking into his throat with fear disguised as aggression and he’s clumsy when he’s being watched; he’s forsaking the gentleness that makes his intimidation feel sincere and it changes the dynamic from an experience to a display.

“Will, I cannot speak for Matthew but if there is anything I do that is beyond your tolerance, you are to let me know.”

Will is fairly sure that tolerance is a concept that's long since been transcended and he no longer has a description for what he's feeling now.

Matthew draws out of him for a fast, wheezing breath, and then Will's full again and his eyes are watering and Hannibal is massaging the inside of his thighs with the heel of his hand, and he feels like meat being tenderised.

"If you need me to stop, you will raise the little finger of your right hand" says Hannibal. "Raise it for me now to show me that you understand."

Will's hands are balled into fists around the white cloth and he considers, for a moment, raising his middle finger instead.

He overrides his self-destruct mechanism and lifts his little finger.

"Matthew."

Will can feel Matthew stuttering inside him, feels the imminence of what he'll do.

There's air in his lungs again and Matthew's grip on his shoulder shakes and then calms. Matthew is bone rigid when he shunts back in.

A warm, wet mouth moves to the head of Will's cock and with no sight to tell, Will wonders how much of the moisture he can feel around the tip has come from his blood and how much is from Hannibal.

Will gasps around Matthew as tongue and teeth skim around the length of him and already his little finger is twitching at the specific vulnerability of teeth by his veins.

Matthew pulls out again and from the way he's crunching his hands across Will's shoulders, he feels like he's struggling to keep himself together. The air Will pulls into his lungs is jagged and he still feels like he's suffocating, with Hannibal's wet tongue creeping around him and the sting from open cuts singing with a visceral clarity.

Hannibal's mouth withdraws and Will feels his legs being nudged further apart, feels Hannibal crawled up between them and a reverberation through the table of something heavy and glass being knocked against its surface. He's trying to move his head up and Matthew pushes him back into place, fingernails coursing the stretched muscles of his neck as though warning him to stay prepared.

The words being spoken around him dissolve into a dissonant noise with no discernible meaning and Will grips onto the tethers at his wrist for balance and for a reminder that he's still conscious.

"It was known for its purifying properties" says Hannibal and Will has no idea what he's referring to.

He hears words like *Jericho* and *water* and he can't hold his thoughts together enough to understand their significance.

“You seek a kind of cleansing, Will” says Hannibal, and his voice is shaking through the calm control. “This is a demonstration of all that entails.”

Matthew’s muttering something incoherent and aggressive and it’s all words being lost and the skin of collarbones pinched and there’s no part of Will that doesn’t feel open and vulnerable and cut up and *used*.

“Stay with us, Will.”

His jaw is being opened by Matthew’s hands and his throat is pushed full again; contracting and loosening.

“Remember that you know how to stop this” says Hannibal.

With his throat jammed full and his hands free to do no more than signal to stop, Will trusts that Hannibal takes his stillness as agreement.

He’s expecting Hannibal to push into him; to close the open spaces around him and choke him from the inside out. There’s pressure around him; blunt touches around everywhere that’s swelling, but the next touch he feels is on his chest. For a moment, it’s like fine gravel on the outside of the cuts Matthew dealt him.

Then, it burns.

Will screams.

He’s still screaming, and it’s clogged; trapped inside him by Matthew, but the vibration of it wracks his throat. His fingers are splayed and he’s straining against the ties on his wrists, kicking his ankles against the table and using his remaining strength to keep his jaw slack and not to just clamp his teeth to subdue the agony.

Hands against his ribcage hold him still until his thrashing subdues.

“Think about why you believe you deserve this” Hannibal tells him as his throat empties and his heels are pushed flat against the table. Grit sifts into the slices on his legs.

Matthew’s pushing into his mouth to quieten the scream, fingers wrapped in his hair and Will can feel liquid spilling fast from his eyes and can do nothing to stop it.

His legs are pulled upwards; hips angled off the table and he feels *flayed*.

“I didn’t think you seasoned them until you’d killed them” says Matthew and his voice is distorted and shaking and he’s trembling inside Will’s throat.

Hannibal makes a sound like disgust and it’s the most primal he’s ever sounded.

“Do you take responsibility for this, Will?” asks Hannibal, and then he’s pushed up inside him, *raw* and *solid* and Will’s trying to consolidate the burning in his skin with the friction

inside him. He's being pulled; Matthew at his head and Hannibal from the hips and his only leverage is the wrapping of fabric pinning him to the damp table. He thinks it must be symbolic, somehow, and then he thinks of ragdolls, and as Hannibal withdraws, he can't think at all; just feels desperation and a kind of hunger trying to claw its way out of his skin.

His hands are clenched into fists.

There are more words; assertions of owning experiences, of repayment and cleansing and other things that won't form meaning through the blood rushing through his brain, whirring in his ears and heating him from the inside out.

Hannibal's inside him like a heavy pulse and there's a thread of heat in Will's mouth, channelling down through his throat and Matthew's shaking; clawing at his shoulders and spasming and Will's swallowing, gagging on the liquid as it empties into him, viscous and sour. He can't shake the tremble out of him as Matthew withdraws and Hannibal surges back into him, a hand wrapped around his salt-stung leg for balance.

Will coughs and it's a wet, urgent sound, carrying the remnants of screaming with it.

Matthew strokes at his jaw, cradling it and running short circles with his thumb over the skin and for all it's supposed to be a comfort, it's drowned out by the way his torso is being yanked and stretched and he's filling and breaking from the inside.

Matthew's speaking and the only word Will can make out is "magpie". He raises his head, coughing the air loose from his sore throat

The first thing he sees is how Hannibal is still dressed; shirt on and trousers tugged down across his thighs, knelt on the table with his mouth open like he's about to swallow Will's soul complete.

The second thing he sees is the blood. It's on everything; on him, brittling Hannibal's hair, soaking his shirt and trailed down his face in ribbons. For a second, Will catches Hannibal's gaze and it's terrifying. His insides twist inside him and Hannibal smiles like no devil Will ever saw in his nightmares.

"You're still responsible" says Hannibal and Will knows this; tries to answer that his self-destruction, his refusal to accept victory without a challenge first, his need to immerse himself in the perspectives of others and so many other things he can't discern right now, shaking and tensing, all of it was converging on something like this; for something to show him if not *why* he's the way he is, then how to *be* it, fully.

The only word he can force out is "yes."

Hannibal seizes inside him, pulsing higher and faster than heartbeats until he's shaking the last of himself out and pulling out in juddering movements.

Will feels grateful, but unclear about what for. Then, he feels disappointment as his head rests back down and all the wound up *need* they'd worked so hard to resuscitate from him stands unattended.

“Such an incredible boy” says Hannibal in a low breath and Will feels the praise coursing through him, feels the hands manoeuvring him so that he’s rested back flat on the table, still the centrepiece and still a feast for the two men holding him, stroking at his skin but not anywhere he can use it.

Matthew’s hands are at the intersection of his collarbones and feeling him trying to soothe him is wrong somehow; the incongruity jars at his bones and he’s pleading, he thinks, for something – anything – but the words are stopped and Hannibal’s hands are on his cock, and there’s a warm mouth on his searing calf and he just *needs* to be gripped and *wrung out* again.

He moves to push his head up because the pressure on his neck feels like suffocation and he’s wondering if the point of this would be to let him come with affection after all the suffering, but he can’t figure out why that would be a lesson for him. Hannibal’s mouth is on him now and it feels like worship, and yet there’s a fear sinking through him that he shouldn’t even be *able* to respond to any of this; not in the way he is, not a tongue flick from letting go.

“Stop crying” he hears in Matthew’s breathy, wheedling voice and Will is trying to answer that he *isn’t*, not so much as he’s letting everything go and he’s almost liquid but for the spike of desperation running him through and the need for air that won’t get into his lungs.

“Christ, you’re *hope*less” Matthew tells him.

Everything is so warm and close around him and the burn is dissipating but his neck feels like it’s caught in a vice. He’s trying to relax himself; unwind the tautened muscles of his shoulders, but he’s feeling the fingers pressing against his windpipe and white in front of his closed eyes.

“I’m not sorry” he hears from Matthew in a haze of hissing consonants.

Hannibal’s tongue trails up the length of him and he thinks that maybe, maybe the lesson was about death after all.

He’s thrashing against the ties and he’s so *close*, but now he’s *scared* and as Matthew pushes the soft tubes of his neck in tighter, he’s scared he’ll die incomplete.

He’s surging against his own skin.

There’s a gap in his consciousness and he’s blinking himself back into being and he’s still *ready*.

He blinks out again, like he’s being folded inside some thick and impenetrable wrapping and can’t push out of it.

His neck feels pressed shut.

He can’t feel Hannibal on him and he can’t feel his hands and he can’t *see*, can’t hear *anything*.

There’s no air.

He’s blinking, still, and nothing’s moving.

There’s not even any pain.

There’s *nothing*.

- -

Chapter End Notes

I promise he's not dead.

PROMISE.

[There's still more to come on this one and a fair few unanswered questions to be resolved but MAN I am being slow with the writing. I keep doing this at work and it's getting increasingly difficult to disguise what I'm up to. LOVE TO YOU FOR READING THIS HORRIBLE DERANGED STORY, YOU EXCELLENT PEOPLE x ]

# Spillover

Will opens his eyes to the red of his blood on the table and a feeling like phantom claws on his neck. He reaches to push himself up and feels his wrists free of their binds. There's a hand on his forehead and his mouth is damp.

"Will."

The way Hannibal says it, it sounds like he's been saying it for hours.

"Ha-"

His answer is swallowed by a cough which wracks his chest. his hands skid on the table.

"You can hear me" says Hannibal, and Will is certain that this is the first time he's heard him sound relieved.

"I need you to tell me how many fingers I'm holding" says Hannibal as his face hazes into view.

Three blurs of pink hover in front of Will's eyes and then assemble into discernible digits.

"Three" he says, but it comes out like more of a wheeze.

"And your name. Can you tell me your name?"

"Will Graham" he says, and this time it comes out like vowel sounds punctuated by glottal pauses and more coughing.

"Good" says Hannibal, sounding less human and more serene in a beat. "You are already faring better than your… partner."

"Don't" manages Will as Hannibal moves away from his field of vision. There's not enough energy left in him to worry about Matthew, yet.

He pushes himself upright and finds himself supported by Hannibal's arms, steering him from the back and wrapping his arms across the unsliced portions of skin of his biceps.

It's easy to sink into the warm cradle of his grip. Will lets his head droop onto the bloodied shirt on Hannibal's shoulder. It's hard to question him without a working voice; easier to let the thoughts stay quiet, and to find solace in the way the older man kisses at his scalp and clutches onto Will like treasure nearly lost.

Will takes in the smell of him; of blood and cooking smoke and come and cologne more expensive than Will could appreciate, and doesn't stop himself from clinging onto his arms. He's not sure he's alive yet, and Hannibal is as close to an anchor as he can find.

He doesn't mind, at all.

Something near the back of his brain tries to remind him, cautiously, that this is someone who kept a man alive in order to thread plants through his innards. And that perhaps, this is a poor receptacle for him to find succour in.

“Beautiful” murmurs Hannibal, clutching at Will’s red hands, and the quiet inside voice of Will’s brain goes silent, choosing instead the immersion of Hannibal’s words.

Will looks down, at the blood on him; dark and drying like chipped enamel, and the blood around him on the table and the way there are thin puddles of it where the salt has upset the smooth shining surface of red. There are trails and smudges of it from where he’s skidded and been pulled and he thinks that Hannibal will need to buy a new table and doesn’t think about why this matters to him.

The quiet voice in his head offers a reminder that no small portion of damage done to him was at the hands of the man comforting him, and that Hannibal’s relief at Will’s destruction not being total is by no means a promise of safety.

“Quite the thing, to have the carnage inside reflected around us, isn’t it?”

The inside voice goes silent again and Will wonders if Hannibal means his body, or the disorder and desecration of the room around them.

Amongst the chaos of shredded fabric, smashed crockery and so much red, Will finds himself staring at a mark on the olive green wall.

It’s thick and dark, like a single brush stroke from an overused paintbrush. Like something’s been dragged momentarily across the surface, and there’s a redness to the hue, even against the green.

Will assumes that if it’s blood, it’s probably his, until it occurs to him that it can’t be.

“These new abrasions won’t scar for long” says Hannibal, and his mouth is by Will’s ear and he sounds pleased.

“If I survive you long enough to heal?” asks Will and this time there are more audible consonants but his throat aches with the effort.

Will expects a rebuke of some sort, and wishes, in a distant sort of way, for it not to be a painful one. He’s fairly sure he’s passed all limits he’s ever tested or imagined and there’s nothing left to experience besides death.

Hannibal unfurls his arms and Will flinches – an old reaction, and not a sensible one.

“Will, please.”

Hannibal pulls him by the shoulders so that his legs hang off the table and they’re facing each other. He’s still propping Will up with the palms of his hands, as though expecting him to wilt or fold without him there to assist.

"*Please*?" questions Will. It's not like Hannibal to ask for something that he's able to take. He knows not to guess at the strength of resistance by figuratively hurling himself against it, but he also doesn't know how to be careful, anymore.

Hannibal opens his mouth as if to answer, then hesitates. He's stepping closer again, blocking out the gaps between them and grabbing – clutching – at Will. And then there's his mouth on Will's and it's more than the muscles and moisture of their mouths working at each other in tandem, and it's not hungry, not violent even. It's a conversation, and Will's answering back and it's like the first time he's felt any sense of mutuality.

They reach the end of the unspoken sentence.

"I much prefer you alive" murmurs Hannibal into the damp skin of Will's forehead and Will considers that this is highest fulfilment of any notions of romance he's ever held.

He doesn't consider how much his standards for such things might be skewed.

"You knew – what he was doing to me" Will says, and this time it's a ragged whisper. He's unable to let the stillness of the moment comfort him. "You were awake, you said."

"Yes."

Will studies the pupils of Hannibal's eyes for indicators of emotion and finds them unhelpfully unreadable.

"Why?" he asks, and his hands are clutching at Hannibal's and he's struggling to keep himself upright without arms around him. The dark smudge on the wall sits in the periphery of his vision like a question mark.

"Why do you think?"

It's not unkind, the way Hannibal says it.

"Break me and rebuild me in your image?" asks Will, and his voice is more of a rasp again.

"That's not so interesting to me as to watch how you rebuild yourself."

"Assuming I don't break all the way."

Will slowly loops the memories of earlier through his thoughts and expects to feel anger; that he was made to endure so much and all for…a lesson? For Hannibal's curiosity? He considers the latter as the catalyst for most of his experiences and the anticipated fury fails to manifest.

He thinks that a normal person should feel enraged at being made to suffer so *fully*.

And with Hannibal gripping onto his hair, stroking his back with warm fingers and letting Will's head droop into the alcove of his chest, Will knows that he's *not* normal.

He knows that he all but invited everything that happened to him.

“The exercise was not supposed to result in your death. In our discussions, he never indicated that he would be so reckless in the moment.”

“Those discussions must have been pleasant” whispers Will to the crusted fabric of Hannibal’s shirt. He doesn’t believe Hannibal’s naivety in regard to Matthew’s murderous impulses.

Hannibal places his hands on the sides of Will’s face, thumbs softly pressing the skin of his cheeks and skimming the reopened split of his stitches. Will feels sick; like a tremble that won’t rise to a full expulsion of everything stinging and roiling through him, but pervasive all the same.

“Think of what your life was before me” says Hannibal, and Will prods at the memories of something more simple than this.

He tries to imagine what it felt like to not be gutted. To not be disfigured, mutilated and strung around on a figurative leash.

The memory feels like a fiction. A nice one, but unreal.

“There was a lot less pain” Will tells Hannibal simply.

“There is a vividness to pain which reminds –“

“Don’t.” Will bares his teeth. “Don’t make it sound like this – like any of this – was a kindness.”

Will coughs as he speaks; great, wracking wheezes as he constructs the words around his heavy tongue and uncrushed throat.

“Kindness is not one of my motives, no” says Hannibal, drawing back and surveying Will with something like pride.

“Matthew tried to kill you. He made no secret of wanting to kill me” says Will, fingers latched around Hannibal’s wrists, prizing his hands from his face. He’s dragging each word out by force. “You *said* he was a *risk*. What did you think would happen?”

“You’re changing the subject” Hannibal tells him, waiting for the coughing to subside.

“You –“

He’s wheezing again, hanging onto Hannibal for leverage.

“…Changed the subject.”

Hannibal tilts his head.

“To answer your question,” he answers, cold, “I did not anticipate that his actions would be so obviously aggressive.”

Will tries to communicate his disbelief with a look.

“His ideas of becoming were rather more focused on continued displays of dominance, and I believe he’d found in you quite the receptacle. I didn’t think he’d attempt to discard that, yet.”

Will wants to ask if this is the extent of what they discussed. If Matthew ever confessed things more honestly to Hannibal than he ever did to him, and why Hannibal was selective enough in his understanding to believe him. His throat seizes and dries and it’s easier to nod mutely than to retaliate. He needs water. He needs to lie down. He needs to rest and not feel like his skin has split into mosaics around a spine that won’t support him.

“Now that I’ve answered you, I won’t ask you to return the same – I would prefer you to let your voice recover until you have strength and full consideration for discourse” says Hannibal. He’s leaning into Will again, his shoulders curving over where Will’s head is stooped, his arms wrapping around him again and a short kiss with teeth is placed on his hairline.

“But I do want you to consider your former life.”

Hannibal strokes the back of Will’s head as he speaks, prompting Will to lean instead into the crook between Hannibal’s neck and shoulder, hands resting on his shirt for balance.

“You imagine that you had a simple life as nothing more than a teacher with stray dogs. Except even what you teach isn’t ordinary, is it?”

Will folds the fabric of Hannibal’s shirt around his knuckles. These conversations always feel like challenges. Like fights that can’t be won.

“Even back then, you were dancing in and out of the scenes and thoughts of the macabre and magnificent, wondering why you were so often lost between the pirouettes.”

Hannibal’s voice is low, steady like the whisper before an attack or a seduction.

“And you failed to take action that would have defended yourself, back then, out of fear for how effectively you might retaliate.”

Will supposes that Hannibal is referencing his failed cop career, and injuries sustained from a time when he had more faith in human nature. He finds the images being painted to be excessively elegant, and not like the blunt lumbering between circumstance and reaction that he’s accustomed to.

“Even then, you understood your capacity to embody the things you strove to contain.”

“Even before you” murmurs Will into the fabric. It’s part a rebuke, part acknowledgement. His voice sits so quietly that he’s almost surprised Hannibal hears it.

“Before your awakening.”

Will wants to sleep.

“I want you to close your eyes for me” says Hannibal. “Close your eyes and imagine how the old life would look to you now.”

Like oil spilling through him, Will lets Hannibal’s voice guide him to visualise his fictional future.

He sees his house in Wolf Trap, with the snow melted from the ground around it and expects to hear the scrabble of dogs spilling out of the door, for the smell of earth and fur and stale whiskey to greet him in welcome.

Instead, there’s silence and he’s viewing the house as if from a car.

“Your freedom was conditional. You failed to meet the conditions.”

It’s Kade’s voice, ruthlessness barely suppressed by a kindly lilt that patronises.

Will knows what this means. Doesn’t need to see it to its conclusion; the inevitability of trials and stone walls and a complete absence of understanding.

His mind moves to show him Alana and she looks…fulfilled, somehow. She’s surrounded by screens and books, by knowledge and comprehension that could have saved her in another life. She’s expanded her expertise to more fields than Will or even Hannibal could understand and she looks at Will with pity; like he’s a forlorn reminder of something she’s shut out.

“They’re happy here” she tells him, indicating the dogs. “Though sometimes I feel like I’m in a sleigh ride when they’re being walked” she smiles, offhandedly gesturing toward the dials of her chair.

Will feels detachment and loss before he feels relief. Objectively, he’s pleased. In overcoming all that was done to her, Alana has surpassed all of them. But the emotional distance between them – enforced and unpassable, it has all the comfort of cold air on a winter’s day. There’s no longer anything tangible between them. No thread to be pulled to draw her closer and no warmth to share.

There’s a coldness in his gut as he blinks the image of her away.

He sees his students; the interchangeable faces and essays and intimidated interactions, only he’s watching them from behind the projector screen. He’s the lesson being taught, not the teacher.

He’s an article written by Freddie and he’s an ugly composite of half-truths and hyperbole.

He hears the beeps from ICUs, sees Jack wavering between being and not being. Sees Bella stuttering in and out of life and through the shrill spit and hum of machines he’s feeling deafened, and an outsider to their misery. There’s no reassurance in him left to offer them.

He’s looking through his thoughts for Abigail and the silence that meets him is no comfort at all.

Then it's the cold stone walls. Chilton's reconstructed face. Syringes and straps and cold showers and bits between his teeth and drug-weighted tiredness.

It seems closer to death than Matthew's hands around his neck ever did.

Will opens his eyes to the darkening red of Hannibal's shirt and feels life pulsing through his chest.

"You see the difference, now?" says Hannibal, and the words aren't needed. Will can feel the difference, in the thrum of his veins, of the breath nearly lost to him, of the warmth of physical contact that he shouldn't be trusting, and yet.

He nods.

"Good. Because you need to make a decision, Will."

Anxiety returns with a thrum of heavy heartbeats.

"Head injuries have an unpredictable path, so I am unable to delay this."

There's a swallow of saliva sticking in Will's throat.

"I need you think of everything Matthew has done to you. Everything he will do to you if given the chance."

Will doesn't ask why. The smudge on the wall is answering its own question. That Matthew is nearby, incapacitated, and that whatever remains of his future is to be decided by Will, by proxy.

"Think of how he tried to press the life from you" offers Hannibal as an unnecessary prompt.

Will swallows the answers he'd like to give that – of how no single act of impulsive brutality from the orderly could compare to the cruelty of Hannibal. Of how Matthew's actions are still reactive, not calculating. Of how they both believed that his ties were of affection, not of need.

He knows that Matthew would see him dead.

"You had stopped breathing" Hannibal says. He sounds, momentarily, as though he's reliving a short trauma.

Will is already reconstructing the events that followed Matthew's hands too tight and heavy round his throat; of how he would have been limp under Hannibal's touch, of the speed and violence of Hannibal's reaction, the fight that would have burst between them – Matthew complacent in his ability to win, Hannibal confident in its failure.

He's imagining Matthew being pulled from the ground, kicking, biting, probably, but for less than a second. For the time it would take Hannibal to push him head first into the olive wall, no longer cautious about how little damage to do, but needing Matthew to stop.

He sees the collapse; the skin across Matthew's skull splitting, the bone shaken and he's skimming through his medical knowledge to try and understand the type and nature of damage to the human brain when hit too hard to recover from.

"If he is to be killed, it should be at your hand" says Hannibal and now his arm is across Will's shoulders and it's an almost fatherly gesture.

"The debt he owes you is now greater than anything he owes me" he adds.

Will can feel his ties between himself and Matthew severed and disintegrating and knows that the man now only exists to him as a tool, or as a strategy.

He knows that he should be feeling the deficit; the hollow swell that rises through a person at the worst kinds of goodbyes, and the selfishness of a misery that comes with it, but there's nothing so soft left in him.

He wonders if all the emotion left to him got burnt out through knives and salt.

He closes his eyes, pictures Matthew with his rounding stare and sprung movements and for a short moment, he's reliving the times when his grip on him was caring, not killing.

It's not enough.

He can feel Hannibal's thoughts twined through his own, and wonders where his sense of sentimentality got lost.

He's scavenging for a more humane reaction but instead, there's knife-cold pragmatism.

There's the knowledge that what he decides now will be what shapes Hannibal's assessment of who he's becoming, or who he's become.

The quiet voice in his head is asking him, persistently, if he's really that person or whether he's still pretending because it's what's expected of him.

Because, it's always been easier to defer to other people's perceptions.

To other people's demands.

The quiet voice is telling him that if he takes the bait offered by Hannibal, if he chooses to end Matthew, that really, isn't that just another way of submitting?

"I must hurry you" whispers Hannibal, his breath skimming the top of Will's ear and the quiet voice shrinks away.

"Preserve or destroy? I'll provide the means for either."

The quiet voice throws words like "righteous" and "forgive" and "just" and Will's wishing he had more solid guidance than the vague concepts of 'goodness' that used to keep him aligned.

He grips the edge of the table, tensing his arms enough to support himself as he lowers his feet to the floor. He feels skin held tight with dried blood stretching around him.

“Where is he?” asks Will, voice still caught.

He doesn’t need to wait for Hannibal’s response; in the far corner of the room there’s a sickly white stretch of limbs and clothing. Matthew’s eyes are closed and his jaw hangs slack. The shape of his skull looks wrong, somehow; like there’s an indent or a raise beneath the short hair where his face has been turned to the floor. Matthew doesn’t look like a person with much life left to him.

Arms wrap around Will’s shoulders and breath is warm in his ear.

“He could yet recover.”

Will nods.

“Would you let him?”

Will stares, as though hoping for Matthew to answer him, to plea, or to mock him for being so damn soft.

His breath is too quiet, swallowed by the sound of Hannibal.

The handle of a knife is pressed into Will’s palm and he finds himself kneeling, one hand supporting himself and the other resting the dirty blade on the skin of Matthew’s throat.

It seems like a natural continuation of things, to do it this way.

Hannibal’s presence looms like approval or like encouragement.

The low wheedle of breath reverberates through the point where metal meets skin and Will isn’t sure if any of this is his choice.

His quiet voice tells him that this, really, isn’t a balancing of the scales. It’s not even self-preservation, at this stage.

His quiet voice distorts and helpfully suggests that at best, this would be an artless solution.

He balances himself on the back of his heels and reaches for Matthew’s right hand; still damp and dark from where it lingered in Will’s wounds. There’s a clammy warmth to the grip-less hand. It feels almost tender, though Will isn’t sure if he means tender as in affectionate, or as in meat.

A thin shudder rises through him and he stills it under Hannibal’s watchful gaze.

The intangibility of everything Matthew was supposed to be, to him, isn’t enough to justify either outcome. His hand grips the knife again and the quiet voice tells him that if he really cared about saving himself, he’d plant the blade in the soft skin of Hannibal’s stomach and drag it upwards. If it was only about survival.

There’s a whisper in the room telling him how he needs to be *honest*.

There’s a heartbeat too heavy, thrumming in his ears.

There’s barely any breath left in Matthew and Will finds this doesn’t bother him, but it doesn’t give him any satisfaction.

The knife has yet to break any skin that isn’t Will’s.

Will presses the point into the floor next to Matthew’s unfurled hand, using it to prop himself as he stands.

This is not the outcome Hannibal wished for either of them, he knows. But it feels like the only way to stop the coiling sickness pervading every cell inside him.

“Save him” he tells Hannibal and it feels like he’s done enough pleading today.

“Take him away, but let him…live.”

He’s upright and Hannibal doesn’t support him as his legs shake. Will grips the table, raising his eyes to meet Hannibal’s.

The skin under his eyes flinches momentarily; it’s not just disappointment. It’s a warning.

“Very well” he answers, and it comes out in a single breath.

“Though I advise you” he adds, voice curling like wire, “to be prepared for the consequences.”

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# Catharsis

Chapter Notes

ANGST

The warning sits heavy in the air. A threat of consequences is not a gentle one, when spoken by Hannibal.

It shakes through Will, and it dawns on him, gradually, that by all reasoning, he is still in shock. And that his choices are not being made with all of his cognitive facets active.

Somehow, he doesn't expect this fact to afford him any absolution from responsibility.

“How do you suggest we repair him?” asks Hannibal. There’s sarcasm in his voice and it’s an ugly, dangerous sound.

“I don’t have your medical... *expertise*” replies Will, wrapping arms around himself and holding his skin in place as coughing shakes at his bones.

“No, tell me, Will. How would you save him?”

His voice has the inflexibility of steel. It seems unfair to have been given the choice, if one of the outcomes is so clearly *wrong*.

“Just…a hospital” says Will, floundering audibly, and if he didn’t loathe the sterility and familiarity of the medical institutions, he’d suggest being allowed to visit one himself.

“Clearly your sense of rationality has been skewed by the earlier…trauma” answers Hannibal, and he sounds parental. Disappointed. Worn out.

Hannibal’s crouching on the ground next to Matthew, studying him like a fallen chess piece.

“The downside to being hunted by authorities is that certain environments become…hostile. Risky,” says Hannibal, staring distastefully at the indent in Matthew’s skull. “This makes me rather more vulnerable than I’m comfortable with.”

“Why offer, then?” asks Will. It’s a valid question. Martyrdom doesn’t become Hannibal, and there’s no reason for him to act on Will’s request – the question posed earlier could have been nothing more as a test for allegiance, not a demand.

“Because…”

Will picks at the shells of congealed red on his arms and is only slightly surprised to find some of the skin unbroken beneath.

“…I suppose there are reasons for your request that I have yet to fathom, and I’d not deny you that unnecessarily.”

Will supposes that there are reasons that he himself has yet to fathom too.

The two men stand in silence, as though waiting for a more elegant outcome to materialise between them.

Will finds that the more he picks at his skin, the less aware of his own senses he feels. It’s a pleasing distraction, and it generates fresh irritation on Hannibal’s face.

Nothing elegant presents itself.

“Very well.”

Will stares from his arms to Hannibal, wondering if the man’s renewed acquiescence has softened anything in his expression.

It hasn’t.

“I’ll…attend…to Matthew” he states. “And you are to remain here.”

Will’s mind immediately supplies him with escape routes; of the uncharted doorways and exits and windows and keys that must occupy this part of the building, of the clothes he can recover and the ways he can wash his skin clean before leaving the confines of the house – but the potential reality of being away from here, of escaping anything at all, it still feels elusive. Like a small comfort of a fantasy that he’s not naïve enough to believe in.

“You are not to fall asleep” Hannibal tells him. “So soon after such an…ordeal. It would be careless.”

Will nods dumbly.

Accepting instruction seems much more simple than pursuing an outcome of his own.

“And I would prefer you to be clean when I return.”

Again, Will nods.

“You’ll remain in your room.”

A short cry emerges from the corner of the room and Will flinches at the sound. Hannibal peers at Matthew, observing his stirring form with resignation.

“I can trust you to find your own way there” Hannibal states and the absence of any question in his tone sits like a heavy reminder of how willingly Will is giving his power over to him. *Has* given his power over to him. He nods.

Matthew lurches on the ground, arms scrabbling for purchase and failing to push himself up. His open eyes betray no understanding of his situation; no recognition beyond a primal need to move, and to run. His body fails him.

“Go” says Hannibal and it comes out like a bark, a shouted ugly noise that lacks composure but asserts itself *completely*.

It reminds Will of Jack, and he’s fumbling his way out of the dining room, gripping the bannister to propel him up the stairs and arriving at the only open door in the corridor.

*His* room.

He pauses for a moment before entering, listening for any sign downstairs as to Hannibal upholding his grudgingly made promise.

There’s nothing beyond a muffled shuffling of drawers and Will thinks that maybe, he’s better off not knowing.

He enters his white room, trying not to let his feet rest too long on each step of carpet lest he stain it with the remnants of damp red clinging to him, padding towards the small bathroom.

Standing any longer, even to shower, feels like more effort than he has left in him. He puts the lid of the toilet seat down, resting on the cold white surface and only recoiling as a delayed reflex when the softest, sorest skin parts register the solid change in temperature.

There’s no towel in the room; no source of warmth and nothing soft. Will feels the shake in his limbs growing and he *knows* it’s still shock; *knows* that it’s just his body’s way of telling him he’s had too much to process and he’ll calm himself in time, but it *hurts*.

His mind helpfully reminds him that he’s only suffering the after-effects of actions he invited.

It doesn’t help.

His mind tries to ask him why; why he would seek out so much abuse, and he can’t *shut his mind off*. He knows he *wants* to blame outside influence and chemicals, but victimhood has never sat comfortably inside his skin. This...this was all *him*.

His inner voice is trying to ask him if he thinks any of this has fixed anything; if the growing fear of who he is has somehow been quelled by anything that happened to him, and he finds himself shouting *stop* to make the sound of his inner voice grow quiet.

His arms are wrapped around himself and his head is facing the floor. He can feel his voice still leaking out of him, feels his arms shaking and heaving in jerks and it’s only when he sees

a small splash of something clear against the  white tiles at his feet that he realises he's *crying*.

He feels too high up, on the seat. Like a totem ready to topple. He folds himself to the floor, coiling in on himself and no longer able to discern which parts of him are being stretched or suffered by the movement. He doesn't stem the flow of tears. He lets them out in hiccupping bursts like the first real response to his situation that he's *earned*.

The sound he's making is almost enough to mask the click of a lock on the bedroom door, and it's definitely enough to mask the low sound of the door to the building closing quietly behind two people. The thin sound of an engine purring to life is lost entirely and Will remains as he is, clutching at his own skin and beginning, only just, to feel like himself.

And he's starting to feel how ugly that is.

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# Dawning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The sky beyond the bedroom window is paling into dawn before Will hears the click of a door.

It hasn't been an easy stretch of hours; the passing of time meted out through the refills of his water glass from the bathroom sink and the subsequent breaks to relieve himself. He's counted out six of each, and felt the lug of limbs and muscles, each exertion heightening the resentment of Hannibal's parting instruction to not fall asleep.

The time spent in the shower, picking off the scabs and shells of congealed and browned blood, it had been its own infinity. For each abrasion that Will managed to soothe clean with warm water and numb fingertips, a new one seemed to make itself known. He'd been gentle, at first; not wanting to further antagonise the edges of nerves at open skin any further – and then frustration had led to impatience and he'd gouged and scraped at the holes in him, cleansing himself inside out until all he could feel was a sting that ran across and through him and sang over his thoughts.

After, he'd wrapped himself in the duvet – with the absence of a towel – and pondered that this lack of forethought on his host's part betrayed an uncharacteristic deficit of courtesy.

In the gaps between pulling himself together and ripping at the seams, Will had tried to explore the dimensions of his space and setting.

He learned that the building holding him was situated by a forest – dense, evergreen spears of branches spiking across the horizon, visible only to him through the secured square of window. He learned that the door to his room was again locked fast, and no amount of fidgeting with the handle would budge it. He learned that the restraints that had kept him tethered to the bed each night were nothing more intricate than straps looped under the mattress and through the sheet, and he'd learned that there were no clothes in the room with him, no painkillers, no distraction from his situation at all.

He'd also learned that the light in his room didn't work, and initially he considered that this was a discreet way of withholding yet more control over his situation. And as night crawled over the green, he'd realised that the lack of inside light spared him the sight of his own reflection as the view from the window turned dense black.

He'd let the curtain fall back down and tried, really hard, not to think about the horror he'd have been presented with if the light had worked.

He'd pictured skin hanging from his cheeks. Teeth exposed and eyesocket split into fragments. Each new conception prompted him to track his fingers across skin to prove himself wrong, and as exhaustion sunk into his bones and into the twisting recesses of imagination, he'd found his attempts to reassure himself more futile as he felt his fingers burrowing into holes which weren't there, felt his jaw unhinging and trying to swallow himself whole.

By the time the door to the building clicks open, Will is burrowed into the duvet, clutching at folds of fabric to stop from wrenching at himself. He misses the time in between and the click and swing of the door to his room.

The fabric still feels damp against his skin.

The roll of Hannibal's voice draws Will out of himself.

"How are you feeling?"

Will blinks as though confirming that the vision of the composed man in the room is not another fiction created by his brain.

"Like…an emptied seashell under someone's heavy boot" he answers.

Hannibal smiles.

He shouldn't be smiling, not at that.

It was *honest*. And the truth of it has a sadness – a complete and awful feeling – to it, and it's not a thing to be smiling about.

"I see your fondness for language has not been subdued these last hours" says Hannibal, and he looks too composed, too untouched by *anything* to be real.

When he moves closer, Will sees a flush of red beneath his right eye in the softly growing light, and scrape marks on his knuckles.

"What are we doing?" Will asks, as Hannibal gestures for him to pull the duvet down.

Will ignores the gesture and Hannibal ignores the question.

"I did as you asked" Hannibal says instead, and there's a near inaudible hum of nervousness in his voice. "He found his way to a hospital."

Hannibal sits on the mattress, folding the white straps out of his way.

"He'll live?" asks Will, no trace of concern in his voice. Delirium, perhaps, and the thinnest edge of strategy.

“Let me see you” says Hannibal, hands reaching toward where Will’s are still grasping the duvet.

The dynamic looks familiar, from the outside; Will as the trembling template and Hannibal poised to impose himself onto the space set out before him.

“You’re not answering me” says Will, a thin shake in his throat that Hannibal will read as anxiety. “It’s discourteous.”

Hannibal smiles, stretches his fingers – scratched, warm from the throb of recently impacted bone – across Will’s hands. He pries each clammy finger from the fabric in turn.

“Are we so unbalanced in dynamic that you would demand an answer from me, and not volunteer reciprocation?” he replies, peeling the covering away in increments.

“It’s cold” says Will blankly. *That should be reason enough*.

“And your question has many potential answers, none of which are as simple as you imply.”

Will closes his eyes and feels a weighted rush of tiredness lurch through him. When he opens them, his pupils are needle-sharp and aimed at Hannibal’s downturned gaze.

“So we both must suffer some discomfort at the other’s request” continues Hannibal, edging the duvet’s top edge across the skin of Will’s stomach. Will doesn’t grant him the satisfaction of a reaction, and his wilting brain is reminding him of autopsies. He allows the warm fingers to press soft against the tears in him, and doesn’t respond to the short hum of satisfaction.

*Not so broken after all.*

“His chances were…favourable, if it was his mere survival you hoped for” says Hannibal, and he’s twisting to face away from Will, pulling all remaining warmth from the bed with a discreet flourish.

Will wants to ask *why* he’s doing this; whether he’s surveying his canvas or simply pissing out a territory.

One thing at a time.

“What did you do?” he asks instead, holding back the instinctual compulsion to cover himself, to fold into himself like a tortoise deprived of its shell.

“As you asked” answers Hannibal, hands holding the skin of Will’s calves in turn, skimming the edges of the sliced skin now drying out.

“No more?” asks Will.

They’re both aware of the evidence on Hannibal’s skin of an interaction with something more dangerous than an unconscious man with no fight left in him.

“Only necessary steps.”

Hannibal smoothes his hand over the cuts as though sealing them, turning back to face Will. He looks tired. As though the anger has been siphoned out of him and he's left with a reservoir of something darker than simple cruelty.

"We have different…interpretations, I think, of *necessary*" answers Will.

"Hmm."

Hannibal wraps his hands around the wrist nearest to him, laying it next to the folded strap on the sheet. He keeps enough gentle weight pressed to the bone to make any protest seem pointless. His calmness, his incessant need to control *everything*; it's exasperating. It's something better humoured with a full night of sleep and a handful of painkillers.

"Christ, Hannibal" says Will, before considering that the words could be taken as another form of address as much as an exclamation. "What did you *do*? What *happened*? Can we not…dance around this?"

Hannibal's shoulders stiffen beneath the fabric of his suit and he weaves his fingers quickly, smoothly, into loops around the straps as he fixes Will's wrist to the bed.

"Just…can you give me a goddamn answer that isn't –"

"You're behaving the way a cornered animal might" answers Hannibal in unsettlingly quiet tones. He's shifted to the other side of the bed in a movement faster than Will could shift his sluggish eyelids, and he tethers the other wrist in short seconds. "Your fear betrays you, Will."

Will is loosely aware that what Hannibal is doing to him now is what he's done to him each night; the securing and the surveying. He's considering that being conscious appears to have no impact on the course of actions.

"I'd call it impatience" defends Will, refusing to acknowledge his body's response to the chill of the room and the rise of goosebumps on his skin. "What could you have *poss*ibly done that was so terr-"

"I warned you that to move Matthew would be a risk, and yet you asked me to" states Hannibal. His voice sounds like glass. "I warned that there would be a risk, and circumstances transpired which…"

Hannibal pauses to ease out a breath; a hot, livid thing that warms the air around Will's face.

He reaches to hold the back of Will's head, thumb circling through the damp knots of hair. His other hand cups at his face, stroking at the skin around wounds, a knuckle resting against the hinge of Will's jaw.

"Matthew was delivered to an institution which will be able to offer him substantial care, the full extent of which he is likely to need, I imagine."

Will finds no comfort in Hannibal's decision to answer one question when he's just raised so many fresh ones in its wake.

“And?” he prompts.

“My identity is no longer anonymous” answers Hannibal. His expression doesn’t show accusation, but there’s a terseness to his gaze. “This means that now, we are both compromised.”

Will shifts involuntarily.

“Who found you?” he asks. His throat feels dry.

“They didn’t *find* me” says Hannibal, seemingly offended. “They en*counte*red me.”

Ribbons of blood assemble behind Will’s eyes as he closes them. Skin splits and insides spill in avalanches until he opens them again.

“I had wanted to remain here” Hannibal says. It’s almost wistful. It sounds the way he sounded when he spoke of teacups. “It seems that is no longer a viable option for me.”

At the withdrawal of Hannibal’s hands from his head, and the gentle pressing of his back to the mattress, a cool thrum of panic rises through Will’s veins, as familiar to him as any blanket.

“What does –”

“There are many hours before action needs to be taken” says Hannibal, standing and reaching to the floor for the duvet. “I’d prefer you to rest during the first few of them. You are in need of it and I’m satisfied it will be safe, now.”

Will swallows as the soft, damp down is placed over him. He doesn’t call Hannibal out on his contrary use of the word ‘safe’.

“Then,” says Hannibal, his features blurring as he steps toward the door, “we will determine your place in this. Sleep, Will.”

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Updates are taking even longer than planned now - when this story started, I was posting the updates a couple of chapters behind what was already written. Now that it's edging towards the conclusion*, I'm not so far ahead, so I'm trying to make sure that I don't derail or leave dangling threads or mix my metaphors any more than I have in this sentence. That said, I still know where I'm taking this helltrain - I'm loving writing this,

and the incredible encouragement and feedback is better than anything I could have hoped for! So, thank you for your patience and your time, and I'd better crack on with this.
Love!

*'A' conclusion, at least. I fear there is to be another arc.

# Persistence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's a rich smell of cooking that rouses Will from insubstantial, fitful slumber. The light in his room is too bright and the ache in his bones too deep. There's no soft transition between sleep and the anxiety of what being awake means; the memories of Hannibal's words the night before sit fresh at the forefront of his mind.

They're in trouble.

*He's* in trouble.

Wherever they are, they've invited the attentions of the authorities, and Will's had enough experience of Hannibal to know that there's no clean way for him to encounter any form of law enforcement and emerge unscathed.

*Unless*…unless he upholds his end of the devil's bargain, and calls Kade in.

The straps on his wrist feel too tight and his bladder tells him he needs to move.

If he spoke to Kade, he could tell her that after this time, after all the blood and performance, he's *caught* him. He's caught the ripper.

He laughs; a single syllable of air that strains his throat and stretches his face.

*He's caught the ripper.*

He feels the weight of the duvet, the pressure on his wrists from where he can't stop pulling at them. He's not fooling himself.

He's just *caught*.

Will tries to pin the daydream a little longer; to hang on to the notion that he might still have choices. And by dint of that idea, that he still has opportunities to make mistakes.

There's a trail. There's a trail leading from Drill and Jamie's mutilated bodies to a burned out restaurant, to a skull-damaged orderly in a German hospital, to whatever nightmare Hannibal raised fresh last night.

The quiet voice in Will's head is singing that whatever the trail, he still has no idea where it's leading. That he's resting somewhere on its path, and he still can't map it, figuratively or

literally. That even without Hannibal getting in the way of his thoughts, this time, he still doesn't *know*.

He hushes the voice and feels sweat gathering between his skin and the duvet.

He thinks back to the list of agents Kade had named for him; not all of them employed by legal agencies, but each with an agenda that may yet assist him.

And then he thinks of how those names and numbers were lost when Hannibal took his phone and Matthew left their laptop in the hotel in Dresden. The smell of cooking interrupts the unwelcome question of why he hadn't tried to invite the anonymous assistance earlier, when he had the first clues about the restaurant.

The odour of meat seems less enticing than the previous meal. Will finds that he's envisioning his own skin being seared over the stove and finds it harder to summon the appetite for it. He supposes that his newfound reluctance to embrace death should be a good thing; a step toward overcoming his compulsive nihilism. Except, the imminence of fresh horror seems inevitable. And not *wanting* it doesn't mean he's not still inviting it.

The duvet sits too clammy and heavy, pressing on the splits and tears on him and he's wondering how he let himself get so trapped and so completely.

If could only speak to Kade, then the deaths in the restaurant, the deaths of Jamie and Drill, those could be attributed to Hannibal, to Matthew. He could paint himself as the hunter with faster game than he was equipped for. He could feign allegiance with Hannibal for long enough to summon them to their location, and he could pretend until the final moment that he'd become the man Hannibal saw when he looked at him.

Except, betrayal has already left too indelible a mark on him, and he's not sure he can reconcile a second attempt.

There's a sound of soft footsteps nearby, meaning that Hannibal wants to be heard, not hidden.

Will grounds himself with a long, heavy breath and feels it rattling through him. It's not, he tells himself, that he's scared of becoming this person Hannibal wants him to be, or of being him already. It's not even that he doesn't want to admit the extent of what he'd lose if he lost Hannibal; it's just, he assures himself, twitching at the straps on his wrists, that he doesn't trust himself not to screw this one up.

However he tries to see things, his escape, either with Hannibal or from him, doesn't seem viable.

"Will."

Hannibal enters the room looking as though he's had a full night of sleep with no weight of worry on his shoulders.

"If you could untie me, I need to piss" states Will.

Hannibal curls his mouth and turns to the window.

“There is no need to be crude, Will.”

“Dr Lecter, I would greatly appreciate it if you could…un*burd*en me from these binds so that I may…visit the *bath*room.”

Will knows there’s nothing to be gained from antagonising Hannibal, and yet it springs up like an impulse. Like a small vestige of control.

Hannibal is at his side, sitting on the edge of the bed before Will registers having blinked. One had rests on Will’s forehead and the other wraps across his throat; the touch is light but his skin thrums with bruising.

“You assume that you will you get what you want simply by wishing it to be, with no recourse of how to create the outcome for yourself.”

His voice is too close, too quiet, heating the inside of Will’s ear and twining through the curls of his brain.

“These are your sheets” Will says. It’s a childish threat to be making.

The hand on his forehead withdraws and returns, hot, fast and stinging across Will’s cut cheek.

It’s less the force of it; a relatively light snap of skin. It’s more the jolt to his perception of the man he saw Hannibal as, and the contrast to this that his actions present. It seems *petty*. Obvious, even.

“You also forget that there are such things as consequences” says Hannibal, pushing onto the covers above Will’s stomach. “These sheets, this guesthouse, will be of no matter to me in a few hours.”

Will grits his teeth and tenses.

“Don’t.”

“You invite ownership of your actions in so many other areas” observes Hannibal, releasing his grip on Will’s skin and folding the covers down. He ignores the shudder in Will’s shoulders. “I don’t see that this is so different.”

“This is…this isn’t what you…this is humi*liat*ion” says Will, voice speeding up as though trying to obscure the words. “I’ve endured enough of that, wouldn’t you say?”

Hannibal says nothing and Will finds the need to fill the empty space.

“There’s nothing to be gained from keeping me tethered here. Unless… you’re planning to do that indefinitely while you make your escape, in which case there’s no point to me trying to reason…”

Will tries to catch Hannibal's gaze as he speaks but it eludes him; a serpentine thing with no pause or mercy.

"Hannibal. Can we not make everything an opportunity to talk about how I'm not taking responsibility? I'm asking you to unknot the bedding. Please."

Hannibal stills, a smile playing at the edges of his eyes.

"Asking isn't so hard, is it?" he says, and it comes out like a taunt. He makes no move to loosen the ties and instead studies Will with soft amusement.

Will's not desperate. Not quite, not yet.  He closes his eyes, breathes slowly, carefully, and answers.

"I'd say you at least owe me the chance to spare myself further indignity" he says, staring at Hannibal on the last syllable. "Please, let me up."

"I would avoid talking to me of any debt of action" says Hannibal, standing. The red under his eye is blooming into mauve in the light.

Will realises his error; proportion and reason have never been within Hannibal's range of perception.

"I'm sorry" he offers, too late.

"Yes."

He wants to ask about more important things than permission to relieve himself. His survival chances, for starters. He suspects there is no answer Hannibal would provide him with that would offer tangible reassurance.

"Are you going to let me go?"

Hannibal narrows his stare and advances back to the bed. He rests his hand on the covers, increasing the weight on Will's stomach and watching the resultant squirm. His amusement has turned brittle.

"A loaded question. Tell me, do you see this as punishment? Or a lesson, perhaps?"

The discomfort – and urgency – is now palpable.

"Yes" answers Will, teeth gritting and skin stinging.

"And you believe yourself to be so inconsequential that I might discard you?"

"Aren't I?"

"Your perception has clearly dampened these last months. What did you think was happening here?"

Will doesn't answer, just clenches at his muscles and tries to spare some focus from holding himself in.

"Who do you think manoeuvred your arrival in Dresden?"

Will suspects that he knew the answer to this for longer than he'd admit. To consider that chance or knowledge had sent him here was too naïve. Too comforting to be real.

"You can't have planned for all of this" says Will, willing Hannibal to speak faster.

"The beauty lies in the variables" he answers. "And in the defiance of expectation. You were remarkable for that."

"You're using the past tense to describe me."

"A slip" offers Hannibal. "But just as Mason was drawn to the pig farmers of the region, I trusted that you would be drawn by a need to reconcile your guilt. Linking the two has worked favourably for me."

"That's why you knew so much about the restaurant" murmurs Will, as much to himself as in answer.

Hannibal strokes at Will's forehead the way one would a sick child.

"Why here?" asks Will. His head is swimming with questions and he needs to not assess his thoughts in terms of liquid, right now.

"Convenience. Tell me, why did you hold Matthew in such high regard?"

The answer, Will knows, would spill out of him if he let it. It would show too much of the uncertainty that risks his preservation.

"Convenience" he answers.

Hannibal looks every bit as displeased as Will expects him to. The pressure on his stomach releases, and the readjustment of muscles and senses takes long seconds to realign.

"I'll attribute your crass answer to your current distress" says Hannibal, and it's invigorating, seeing him frustrated. As though Will holds a place of honour by virtue of being one of the few people to irk him and remain uneaten. For now. He fights back the urge to blurt accusations at Hannibal for the mentioned distress, and inwardly congratulates himself for having at least some sense still available to him.

"I'm sorry" he says again. "I just can't…can you…"

He remembers Hannibal's potential for abusing omissions of specificity.

"Please can you let me up? I'll answer you – I will. Just…please?"

Will is sure he's never had to plead for anything so vehemently before and it curdles with his physical discomfort.

Hannibal is smiling; or rather, Hannibal's eyelids are crescents and not ovals, and his mouth is less pursed. This is not a pleasure Will wants to afford him regularly.

"I would prefer you to be clean for breakfast" he agrees, and he's bent over the knots, unpicking them. Will is pushing himself off the bed before Hannibal has his hands free of the sheets and each step towards the bathroom is its own marathon.

Hannibal is calling his name and Will doesn't answer him. There are limits to the concessions he'll make to gratitude. There's a full second between him standing over the bowl and the release of his muscles, and in the moments that follow Will feels himself recomposed; as though the control granted to him by Hannibal is his own, now.

*He can survive him.*

Not indefinitely, and not if he risks too much.

But he can get through this, and if not *living*, then at least…at least he can persist.

- -

There are clothes laid out on the bed again. The covers pulled off and out of sight, and in their place is a white shirt with pearlescent buttons, black boxers and trousers, the latter with stern creases down the length of the legs, grey socks and polished black shoes.

Will calculates that Hannibal has had less than three minutes to arrange and exit the room, and to assemble the outfit, and yet he's languishing in the open doorway with no trace of exertion colouring his skin.

"You have warmer layers to add when we leave, but this should be sufficient for breakfast" he tells Will.

"Isn't it a little late for breakfast?"

Will finds he isn't questioning the dynamic of Hannibal watching him dress, or of choosing and arranging his clothes for him.

"It is the first meal of the day. The first meal of a new life."

Will doesn't hiss at the soft scrape of fibre over serrated skin as he pulls the garments on, and he again regards the clothes as armour. Not quite his own, but…enough.

He finds that he's moving through his injuries more easily than when he had fewer of them, and only gives himself a moment to speculate that it could be because he's yet to fully *see* the impression these last days have made on him.

Hannibal’s hand rests on his shoulder and he guides him to the door, down the soft carpet of the corridor, down each tensed step of the staircase and to the warm olive of the dining room.

- -

Chapter End Notes

Everything is going to be just fine.

# Preparation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The evidence of the previous day is still present in places; the smear of near black blood on the wall, like a farewell wave from Matthew. There's a new cloth over the table, the edge of it sunken into the knifed indent at one end. There are congealed specks on the carpet from Will's own blood, and this disregard for aesthetics seems incongruous with everything Will knows of Hannibal. His place is set – the same as yesterday's – and as Will sits in the chair pulled out for him, he can make out textural shifts beneath the cloth.

The table hasn't been cleaned since he bled across it.

He doesn't mean to question Hannibal with the way he looks at him, but he's offered an answer all the same.

"When they find this place, they should find sufficient evidence to assume you dead."

Will nods in answer, and in his head he's gripping fast onto the idea that he's still being allowed to get through this alive.

"Assuming that those who find it are not as intuitive as your friends from Quantico" he adds.

Will wants to say *they were your friends too,* but that would mean acknowledging the contorted view of such things held by Hannibal, and as he admits to himself how little he misses them, now, it would mean acknowledging the extent of his own metamorphosis.

He says nothing.

Hannibal heads to the kitchen and returns with a carafe of red juice. He fills Will's glass, then his own.

"Pomegranate" Hannibal explains, disappearing again to retrieve the food.

The symbolism is intentional; Hannibal is too considered for it to be anything but. Will knows that when he drinks, he will be showing his commitment to follow Hannibal to the underworld, per se. *As though he's been anywhere but since he's known him*.

Hannibal places a large ceramic plate in front of him. It's adorned with small morsels of flesh tones, with mushrooms, and egg that shouldn't look so freshly cooked for having been abandoned for the duration of their earlier conversations.

“It may be some time until we have opportunity for such extravagances as these” says Hannibal, and he looks wistful again as he takes his seat opposite Will.

“To the next life” he volunteers as a toast, raising his glass.

Will raises his own to match it, and drinks.

Six long sips, to soothe his throat.

The first bite, the mushroom, is one of the best mouthfuls of food Will has tasted. The next, a sliver of pink cut from an oval of flesh, surpasses it, and Will misses the idea that he used to be squeamish about the meat served by Hannibal. He can’t decide if his enjoyment is hindered or enhanced by the pride in Hannibal’s gaze as he watches him chew.

“We’ll cross the border to Austria by dawn” Hannibal tells him. “From there, I think upwards to Prague?”

It would seem like more of an adventure if there wasn’t a prerequisite of bloodshed on the journey. Will swallows his mouthful and can’t find an answer in his throat. He’s never been one for wanderlust and his earlier travels had never taken him outside America, until Hannibal.

“My apologies. I’m being presumptuous. How are you finding the meal?”

Will slices at the next piece of unnamed meat on his plate; a stripe of browned, glazed skin with layers of sinew. He doesn’t humour the idea that this came from any animal that walked on four legs.

“It’s…delicious” he tells Hannibal, cursing his lack of ability to afford the food due praise. “But you know that. Are you *fish*ing?”

It’s pleasant, this. It’s a pretence. It’s polite and it has no echo of their earlier interactions. It doesn’t feel as though Will’s eating a meal at the same table he’d been strapped to hours earlier.

It’s as though they get to be different people with each new setting they move through.

“I merely wanted to be assured that you were enjoying it” says Hannibal, and he smiles, with his whole face this time.

“Company adds to the enjoyment of a meal, wouldn’t you agree?” he adds, cutting new slices from his own plate.

Will bites back a multitude of responses about why Hannibal may be afforded more of the aforementioned company if he stopped putting the people he knew into the dishes.

“Do you miss Bedelia’s?” he asks instead.

Hannibal maintains the veneer of pleasantry as he chews, then answers.

“I’ve not yet had opportunity to feel her absence. I expect that I will; she was an excellent companion. But I was prepared for its inevitability.”

Will prods his fork at a knuckle of bone on his plate, and tries to calculate a way to cut the meat from it with decorum.

“How do you pre*pare* for that?” he asks. He assures himself that he’s not asking Hannibal how he would prepare for his own absence, however it may come about.

“By accepting that there is nothing to be done about it. I find no purpose in lamenting the unavoidable.”

“Fair” Will replies, a thin curl of the knuckle meat on his fork. “Did you kill her too?”

The meat is leathery when he bites it.

“No.”

Will looks for signs of deception in Hannibal’s face as he chews, and finds none.

“Her desire to leave was less discreet than she perhaps hoped” he continues, “or she wished me to know of her intentions when she first wore the acrid stench of ethanol and lanolin.”

Hannibal’s reverence is calculated. It’s a warning; that he knew more than he admitted to Bedelia, but it’s a rulebook, too; he’s telling Will that he guessed her involvement in planning the restaurant’s demise, but allowed it out of…curiosity? Respect? He’s telling Will that the same opportunity for subversion may yet exist to him, and he’s hinting at the thin boundary between permissibility and retribution. Will understands with an uncomfortable clarity that Bedelia’s escape was allowed because it served Hannibal’s own interests. He also understands that Hannibal is unwilling to embrace loneliness if it can be avoided.

“I would be reluctant to see her gone from the world unnecessarily” he adds as a neat completion of his confessional.

Will says nothing of the other people Hannibal has hurried from the world in the name of necessity, and shuts out the sensory echo of Abigail’s pulse stilling under his fingertips.

“How do you feel about Matthew’s absence?” counters Hannibal, filling his fork and not taking his eyes from Will.

The coil of skin sticks in Will’s throat for a breath.

“There are aspects of him I miss” says Will. He doesn’t say that those aspects are the ones he saw himself in. The charred and vicious parts; the parts which held a mirror to the things Will feared himself capable of, and the parts that proudly sustained themselves in ways more accomplished than Will could admit. The parts he needed to find acceptance for, because if he couldn’t manage it for Matthew, then there would be no way for him to accept it in himself.

Hannibal is smiling again, smiling as though he can hear Will’s thoughts like a confession.

“The aspects of him which had you pinned like a panting mess beneath him?” asks Hannibal.

Will drops his fork on his plate in surprise.

*This is* not *suitable dinner conversation*. He feels heat rising in his cheek and scrabbles with his fingers to regain control of his cutlery.

“That’s…that is not what I meant.”

Hannibal laughs, and it’s a sound so alien that it pulls at Will’s gut and tenses his muscles into strings.

“Come, Will. Surely we’re beyond embarrassment by now?”

Hannibal’s composure returns, and Will arranges egg on his fork.

“*You* might be” he answers, and he’s quiet again, looking to his plate to avoid Hannibal’s stare.

“I’m sorry, Will. I did not mean to add to your discomfort.”

Will doesn’t answer him. In a way, he’s grateful that Hannibal appears to have derailed the conversation from the vulnerable place it was headed toward.

The next few bites continue in near silence; there’s ample food on the plates to sustain a longer meal than their schedule and the wilting daylight suggests they have time for. It takes until their plates are nearly cleared until Hannibal speaks again.

“I have said before that trust is not yet something we can fully embrace.”

Will nods, reluctant and yet needing to hear to hear the continuation.

“But you’ve always shown remarkable tenacity, and you continue to present me with variables. I admit that I find it affirming. I’m in no rush to forsake you, Will.”

The food in his throat is feeling increasingly dry as it cools.

“I’m optimistic that my trust is a thing you can yet earn, if not as fully as you once had it. Could you?” he asks. “Would you want to?”

Will stares the way he’d look at his dogs when they misbehave, and catches himself before the full admission of his expression can hit Hannibal. He nods, concentrating on his food.

Trust is not a thing people have when they tie people into their beds.

Lock them into their rooms.

Rub salt into wounds.

Withhold even the most salient bits of information.

Dress the other person to their design.

Entwine them so tightly in their machinations that there's no space to find the option to resist.

There's anger coursing through him at the glibness of Hannibal's questions, and Will wonders if this is what he was missing all those times he suppressed his thoughts with medication. The clanking, jarring pain that runs through him with the absence of his drugs seems like an unfair trade-off for the chance to re-engage with his reactions. He bites them down.

"*Earn* your…surely this is what you're en*suri*ng by keeping me pinned so closely to your plans?" says Will.

"Conditioned behaviour is a different beast altogether" answers Hannibal, unphased. He picks the knuckle from his own plate and chews the meat from it. "I want only the person you are willing to be."

"And if I'm not that person?"

"Then I do not doubt that you have the means to do me great harm. I'd encourage you to try, if that were the case."

"If."

"Indeed."

Will struggles with the food a moment longer before Hannibal reaches across the table and pulls the cutlery from his hands.

"Pick it with your hands" he instructs, gesturing toward the knuckle.

Will obeys, grateful for a chance to avoid further dialogue which might damn him if he let it out.

The strings of meat cling to his teeth; for such a tiny morsel, the effort it requires seems to outweigh the reward. By the way Hannibal stares, Will assumes there to be some great symbolism to the body part it represents.

"Tough, isn't he?"

Hannibal's words speed the last mouthful of flesh from the bone.

"Who."

Hannibal only smiles in answer, and watches with satisfaction as Will struggles to swallow the last of it.

Will coughs out a "no" as the realisation materialises.

"I would have thought you'd expect this" says Hannibal as Will looks at the near empty plate in front of him.

“You said you’d – you said he was safe.”

“He is.”

“You said he was *alive*, Hannibal.”

“He is, though to what purpose I don’t know.”

Will places his hands on his stomach as if to soothe the truth from it.

“I’m the one who has to earn *your* trust?” demands Will, his anger gathering momentum as the horror of his own complicity in eating – eating what he’s just eaten – grows.

“The rest of the meal had other sources” Hannibal tells him lightly. “It seemed unfair to let those whose only crime was to follow the pig-headed Verger’s whims go to waste.”

“I thought they burned” says Will quietly, wishing that Hannibal would retract the not fully spoken admission.

“There were many more than you encountered” says Hannibal, and he looks proud.

Will scrunches his eyes, ignoring the sting of his face, and when he opens them again he can all but feel the fury burning in them.

“You didn’t mind when they were anonymous, and killed completely” Hannibal says, reaching to pull the plate from in front of Will. “We only took his thumbs. What did Matthew mean to you that you’d feel so abhorred by consuming this small part of him?”

Will can’t answer, not with Matthew’s skin scratching at the back of his throat, and this seems fitting, somehow.

“Do you not think it fitting that you at last get to enforce a small victory over him?”

“Not everyone requires…justification. To live.” He stops himself from challenging the idea that the values of their lives are not solely as Hannibal believes them to be. That seems a taunt too far.

“Was it as simple as fondness for the man?” asks Hannibal, ignoring Will’s answer. “Sexually, I mean.”

Will rests his head in his hands and refuses to make eye contact.

“Because,” continues Hannibal, “I see no reason that I cannot fulfil a –“

“Stop. Please.”

Hannibal carries the plates out of the room as Will pushes himself out of the chair.

“I merely wanted to stress the pointlessness of not admitting to ourselves what we enjoy” says Hannibal as he returns, empty handed. “I enjoy you very much. I believe that this is not

unreciprocated. Will you help me with the dishes?"

Silence suits Will better than any reply he could give the man.

It seems pointless, washing their plates and leaving all the blood intact, but Will tries to be sparing with the idiosyncrasies he calls Hannibal out on. He follows him back through to the kitchen, and it's a smaller space than he'd imagined; all corners and cupboards and smoothed oak and dim light. He doesn't ask who used to own this building, nor what Hannibal did to them to secure its vacancy.

"I have packed sufficient to sustain us for a short while" Hannibal tells him, running hot water over the white ceramic plates, picking off the short bones – thumbs – and setting them on the wooden worktop. He hands Will a teatowel; a kitsch thing with printed cross-stitched hearts. The incongruity of it pulls a dry laugh from Will's mouth.

"Of course, I am being presumptuous again, in assuming you wish to accompany me willingly."

Will fidgets the towel across the first damp plate pulled from the sink and handed to him. The white plate; a copy of the weapon Matthew had used on Hannibal only a day before, and it seems like an obvious echo.

"It's preferable to having you pick my flesh out of your teeth" says Will, not admitting that this may not be a mutually exclusive outcome of their planned elopement.

"I don't have sufficient freezer space to carry you across the borders" says Hannibal, and it takes Will a full second of staring at the side of Hannibal's face to realise that he's joking.

"Apologies. That was perhaps cruel" says Hannibal, handing Will the slippery glass of the carafe.

It would be simple to swing it onto a hard edge of worktop, grip the smooth edge and slide the serrated glass into a jugular. Swift, and merciful, even. Or to direct a sharp angle into the taught skin of his inner thigh, crippling and killing the man in no more than a minute.

Will feels himself being watched, as though Hannibal expects his actions. As though he'd be disappointed if Will didn't at least consider it, if not try.

Will polishes the glass with the cloth and matches Hannibal's eyes – for a second only, but for long enough to say that he knows this would have been a chance to fight, and he knows he's not taking it.

The cutlery that Hannibal passes to Will seems inconsequential, and though the impulse to jab it through the softest parts of Hannibal's neck is not gone completely, Will knows that he's committed to obedience in this instance.

The dishes completed, Hannibal places his hands on Will's shoulders and steers him out of the kitchen, through the dining room and to the corridor.

“I need to ask something of you” he says, his breath too close to Will’s neck and heat travelling through his clothes to Will’s skin. “If you would humour me this, I would feel somewhat reassured.”

Will allows himself to be guided back up the staircase, to a door at the end of the upstairs corridor.

Hannibal stands between him and the door, one hand resting on the handle and the other on Will’s arm. He’s careful to place his grip away from the damaged parts; as though the placement of injuries has been seared into his memory and the barrier of clothes does not hinder his awareness of them.

“I’m giving you a choice” he says. “I doubt you’ll see it as such; you’ll expect me to have manoeuvred this to my advantage…”

As though it could be anything but.

“…but if your only motivation for accompanying me is out of a lack of alternatives, I would rather have you take the alternative.”

“You *want* me to run?” asks Will before he can stop himself.

“I want you to have the option.”

The door opens to a more spacious room than the one Will had occupied. Bold red curtains frame the windows, set off by the soft grey of the walls. The bed is the centrepiece of the room; steel framed, almost antique, with red and chrome bedding. Facing the bed is a tall square draped in black fabric; almost stretching to the height of the room and spanning the width of the bed. Beneath it, half obscured by the folds of fabric, is a table, and… *oh*.

Chapter End Notes

It's nearly over! It'll be at least a week until the final chapter is up (I'm not even close to finishing it and I am disastrously slow at these things) but in the meantime, thank you so much for reading this, for giving me encouragement, and for sharing in the horror. You're all amazing!

# Reflection

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Oh.*

Will's insides contract as he focuses on the items laid out; functional yet ornamental.

It's the phone that sits amidst them that looks the most incongruous; much like Will's own device but different enough to lack the comfort of familiarity.

His eyes scan sideways and the absence of medication propels his nerves into fresh reaction. It's not as simple as fighting or fleeing. Not now.

The cuffs are the tamest of the items; perfunctory clasps of metal linked with short chains, and they seem too *ordinary* for Hannibal's tastes. Will would expect something more ornate; antique, or possibly spiked, if he'd expected anything at all.

He suppresses the instinctual twist in his gut as his eyes land on the next item; a linoleum knife, curved and belly-ready.

He hadn't credited Hannibal with having a sense of humour until now.

There's a longer knife next to it; steel handled and smooth metal, the slicing edge reflecting the red of the curtains. There's a full coil of black rope, heavy looking and faintly iridescent in the low light. There's a thick wooden slat with two nails jutting out of one end. Blood rushes from Will's brain as he stares. There's a collar – a leash; weathered, buckled leather linked to a shining metal chain; it might be a dog collar in circumstances different to these. There's a gun, and a box of 9mm rounds next to it. And there's a short silver pole; shining, the same girth as… it's *indecorous*.

Will feels different threads of muscle contracting as he takes in the intent behind each object.

"The numbers for your contacts at the FBI are on that phone" Hannibal tells him helpfully.

Will doesn't move. He can feel himself being assessed, dissected visually. It's an ultimatum, this table, but it's also a shrine.

Blood swims heavy in his ears and he encourages his mind to supply him with the ways he'd use each item to overcome Hannibal; swing the wood into his face, wrap the rope across his

throat and tug until that knowing smile went slack and purple and his eyes swam pink and then glazed and empty.

He tries to conjure the feeling of victory at the imaginings and it doesn't manifest. It's nothing like the dim satisfaction of purging Mason's cruelty from the world, or the powerful relief of overcoming Randall Tier and it's not an easy fantasy to sustain, not with the rope and the threat and the fast running images of each item being applied to *him* and not to Hannibal.

"If this were a duel your hesitancy would have seen you long defeated by now" says Hannibal, now stood behind Will, close enough that he's warming the air between them.

Will steps toward the table; careful, measured, obscuring Hannibal's view as he reaches for the only item that seems to make sense to him.

The linoleum knife fits neatly into his hand. A finger latches through the handle, and he angles it out as he turns to face Hannibal and close the space between them.

He points the tip of the blade to Hannibal's clavicle. There's no resistance; just a heady sigh and a look of curiosity.

"I don't…owe you this" says Will, not moving the blade.

"And what if I said I would use each item on you if you did not?"

Will fails to stop the choked breath in his throat from making a sound too close to a gasp.

"You wouldn't."

It sounds hesitant, like a question. Hannibal only smiles – a thing of cruelty shrouded in soft curves – and says nothing.

"So I kill you…"

Will tracks the curve of the blade across the tensed parts of Hannibal's neck, considering it.

"…And I call Kade, and…"

Will pulls the knife back, then presses it against the thick cotton of shirt clinging to Hannibal's stomach.

"…And end this."

He's close; *too* close. Hannibal's arms are on his back, pulling him – and the knife – closer. The blade skims sideways, not inwards, and does no more than snag the fabric.

This has nothing to do with trust. It's a *dance*.

"And yet I am not dying and you remain a free man."

Will doesn't query this use of the word "free".

“What now?” he asks, and his mouth is by Hannibal’s ear, close enough to taste the residue of clove shampoo. His hands are tight knots of unmovable strength; the knife hasn’t shifted, but it’s as much a way of distracting from the other knots forming in his body and Will could wail at how useless he becomes when faced with the prospect of someone else making an escape *for* him.

“What is it that stops you from killing me, now?”

Will doesn’t have an answer.

He has too many answers.

Will snakes his free hand around Hannibal’s middle, resting it in the small of his back and pushing him heavier onto the flat edge of the knife.

It feels like he’s clutching onto him. From the outside this would look tender. From where Will’s head feels too hot and weighted on his shoulders, it feels like the both of them are being tenderised, trapped in machinations put in place but not controlled by the other.

“It wouldn’t be…”

Will finds that he can’t say the word “righteous”. It has a taste to it now that sits ugly on his tongue when he imagines applying the word to his own actions.

“It wouldn’t resolve anything” finishes Will and he feels Hannibal draw in closer with an intake of breath. There’s no space left between them now; all rustling fabric and close pressed heat and Will’s fingers growing slack around the handle of the knife.

“Are you not afraid?” asks Hannibal, his voice so low that it’s barely distinguishable from the patter of thoughts in Will’s own head. “Are you hesitating to act because you fear I’d overpower you?”

“No.”

“Are you worried, then, that I won’t?”

Will releases his grip on Hannibal and pulls back from him slowly, reaching his hands out behind him to rest on the table. The knife drops from his fingers, knocking into the other… objects. There doesn’t seem to be a way to refer to them collectively without inferring some inevitability of their use.

“I don’t want to kill you” he tells Hannibal, spreading his arms as though guarding the table from Hannibal. “And I don’t want to invite anyone else to try.”

Hannibal steps forward and the space between them is suffocated once again. He looks pleased.

“Why?”

Will hesitates; as he inhales, Hannibal spreads his arms to catch him by the wrists and Will knows he can't think of this as giving up; more of accepting the inevitable and finding a way to embrace it.

"There is a kind of comfort to finding one's self…accepted" says Will carefully. He expects Hannibal to bristle at the word *comfort* and is not disappointed.

"Your choice of words is curious" Hannibal tells him, his hold on Will's wrists tightening and burning against the sores already there.

Will tries to smile as far as his face allows him.

"It would seem callous to forsake the… nurturing you've offered me" he tells Hannibal, and feels his wrists crossed behind him as he's enveloped, like a chrysalis awaiting regeneration. He believes himself, almost. He's never felt so protected, or valued, until Hannibal. It's easier to view that in relation to what he's being offered, than to use the fact as criticism of any past that let him down. He knows his own pathology too well to afford it any pity.

"My acceptance of you has long been implied. What of yours? Of yourself?" asks Hannibal, letting go of Will's wrists. He's pressing into him now; as though seduced by his accomplishment in Will's submission.

This is a harder thing for Will to prove. He tried to accept the parts of himself he recognised in Matthew, and found them…at times, abhorrent. But then, he bargained for the man's survival; as though to deny him would be too great an act of hypocrisy. And he's trying, still, to accept Hannibal as he is; because to discard him would mean losing far more than just his darkest reflection.

"Can you see yourself?" asks Hannibal, and now his hands are on Will's face, and his tongue is sliding swiftly across the open skin of his cheek. "See who you are, now."

He steps back, pulling at Will's shirt and unpicks each button from its fabric clasp.

"I know who I am" murmurs Will as a reflex.

Hannibal hums in agreement, warm fingertips skimming across the abrasions as he pulls the shirt away from them, and Will feels like a gift being unwrapped. The proximity of so many tools for the destruction of the other is doing nothing to calm the weighted pulse juddering through him.

His trousers drop down at the deft command of Hannibal's fingers and Will finds himself stepping out of them obediently, kicking off his shoes and toeing his socks from each other. The cotton clings to the patches of skin where healing hasn't had enough time to seal him shut, and the small sting it brings radiates through him like something defiant, or something earned.

He reaches for the collar of Hannibal's shirt. Even if he's being puppeteered, there are ways to pull at his own strings.

“I’ll come with you, willingly” he tells him, and wonders if he’s been so ritualistically stripped in order to provide some symbolic gesture of sincerity.

Will undoes the first button of Hannibal’s shirt, fingers steady. Hannibal’s eyes are closed, as though savouring something new, exquisite and belonging only to him. As though his thoughts are not ready to revert to murder in less than a heartbeat.

As Will reaches the second button, he’s stopped by Hannibal’s hand on his wrist.

“Not yet.”

And without protest, the dynamic shifts to remove the symmetry between them. Will nods; it’s hard to challenge Hannibal’s complete authority over him when he still believes in it so intrinsically.

Hannibal takes a step away and Will turns to follow his movements; he’s by the table and *no*. No, not after all this. Not after the quieting and the softening and the promise to go without fighting. His brain tries to urge him to panic; the arsenal of objects existing both as threats and suggestions. His brain tells him instead to look, and something else infuses a hunger, a kind of plea, in the way he looks from Hannibal to the table and the fabric behind it.

“I need you to see” Hannibal tells him. “I need you to see yourself as I see you.”

Will expects Hannibal to reveal a display like a petri dish and diagrams at that; as though he is the experiment gone terribly right. Or a trophy, perhaps; a shining testament to Hannibal’s own influence and osmotic persuasion.

Hannibal stretches, reaching to the top of the black fabric covered square overshadowing the room, and pulls with a flourish more becoming of an unveiling at a gallery.

It takes a second to register what’s just been exposed; the contents of the room appear in duplicate and he watches Hannibal appear at his side in an angled reflection.

“Look, Will.”

Will stares first at the mirror’s steel-framed edges, fearing what he’ll see if he lets his focus fall on its centre.

Then he studies Hannibal, behind him; protective but not reaching to touch him. Like a professor regarding his protégé.

Will looks to the space in the mirror where his own reflection should be and it’s like a scorch mark in the silver; he finds instead that it’s easier to look for himself and see Hannibal.

“You won’t see if you close your eyes” Hannibal tells him and he’s close to him, so close, but still not touching at any point. Will understands that he needs to face himself alone, in some sense of the word.

Will replenishes the air in his lungs and braces himself for his reflection. He starts with the parts of him he’s already seen in the showers and baths and slow waking moments. The pink

burns around his ankles, creeping up his calves; it looks muted against the backdrop of the red bedding behind him. Even the red lines running through the burns, those ones gifted by Matthew; they look thin. Nothing more than a stripe, and no more deep than skin that will heal.

It feels like taking inventory.

His eyes travel slowly up, putting the peripheral blur of contusions into focus. There are the faded yellows of bruises he doesn't remember earning. These ones look like the marks he'd find on himself from his erratic sleeping and lack of self-care. They're a small reminder of the life he had, and as his eyes skim further upwards it seems like the last chance to see himself as he was, before the reality shows him how much he's changed.

Hannibal's breath is steady behind him, warming the back of his neck.

The mottling of his skin intensifies nearer his hips, interrupted by crescents of pink as the skin becomes obscured by hair. He ignores the sight of his half-hardened cock.

He blinks, and doesn't check to see if he's blushing, not yet. He's staring now at the curved wound in his belly and until now, he's only seen it at oblique angles looking down; in photographs or in his nightmares, but never laid out so boldly. The skin is raised on either side of the incision, the stitch holes puckered and white in contrast. He feels the echo of Hannibal inside it; a false memory, but no less vivid for it. His eyes fall on the shape of the man behind him, like a shadow or like a demon.

He feels possessed.

He keeps staring, and he knows this reflection is his own because Hannibal is telling him it is, but it still feels like a screen showing him some reconstruction of too many mistakes. He moves his left arm, twisting it to show the mottled pinks and greys and yellows of his wrist, the scuffs on his knuckles still forming scabs, and is still slightly surprised to see his reflection moving with him.

His chest is a litany of scuff marks and indents, and the knife mark from Matthew still looks open; still too red to be closed and healing, splitting his chest into two separate sides. His upper arms, too; the small crater of his bullet wound seems eclipsed by the threads of burgundy parting his skin. He looks fractured. Fragmented. His neck is a dense smudge of mauves and shadows that he's only used to seeing on the dead, not the living. He's impressed; the strength it takes to make such striking impressions is not an easy thing to manage, and he wonders if he'll ever be given any opportunity to congratulate Matthew on the skill of his second failed murder.

Hannibal hasn't moved; when Will glances to the reflected vision of him, he sees only his eyes following Will's own gaze, and a calmness which shouldn't be as reassuring as it is.

It's easier, to glance from Hannibal's face to his own. It's a smoother transition, somehow, than to see himself without this context. He recognises his own expression; steeled acceptance, defiance without direction, and something lost, wounded; something else still

searching for the possibility of salvation. He wonders how much of this is visible to Hannibal, or whether his expression, to him, is simply a plea.

Will is no longer sure he believes the mirror.

His hand reaches to his face and the hand in the mirror matches it.

He thinks of masks, and of peeling them back.

He thinks that, having spent so long immersed in horror, that it was inevitable that it should manifest in his skin so clearly. And yet, the more he stares at his face, and matches his fingers to the meandering, lumpy stripes across his cheek, veering into the hair on his jaw, the less he feels like accepting it.

It's grotesque.

*Now everyone can see what you are*, his brain tells him.

A creature of blood and horror.

The difference between himself and others now made explicit.

He wonders if he should, in some way, be grateful; for the times he sought reprieve from interaction, he'd have been spared it if his face had worn such violent warnings.

Behind him, Hannibal inhales deeply, as though Will's newly resigned distress has an aroma to it that he finds enthralling.

It's not, Will tells himself, that he's vain. That he cares how he looks. That he's grimly accepting of the fact that if he couldn't work out how to date before all this, then he's more than done now. It's none of that, at all. It's not even that his disfigurement presents him with a unique kind of vulnerability that Hannibal will be able to manipulate long before he has a handle on how to process it.

It's that now, there's no way of hiding who he is. *What* he is.

There's no secrecy to his face, anymore.

Everyone can see him.

*Violent creature.*

*Victim*.

Stuck inside a skin that's been changed by too many people.

"Come back to me, Will."

Will looks to Hannibal's reflection. He wants to turn from the mirror but it's hard, still, to look away and let his mind exaggerate what's already severe enough.

“I’m here” he tells Hannibal, still looking forward. His hands are back at his sides, and he feels the warmth from Hannibal’s arm as it drapes over the taut ridges of his shoulders.

“What do you see when you look at yourself?” he’s saying and it’s a whisper in Will’s ear, a hot coil of a question threading through the inside of Will’s head.

“I see my skin screaming in ways I couldn’t” he answers.

“Do you feel as though you are screaming now?” asks Hannibal, and one warm hand snakes down his back, coming to rest below his coccyx.

“Not anymore” says Will, looking directly at the reflection of Hannibal’s eyes. And, as he follows the gaze as it lowers to the table and its many tools, “not yet.”

The acceptance of his mutilation sits at odds with the spikes of heat running through him beneath Hannibal’s fingers, beneath his gaze and the thin hum of approval in his throat. Will pivots on his bare feet, wrapping his arms around the soft cloth of Hannibal’s shirt. It’s like a hug; like something much safer than the reality of being so close and so tangled to someone so dangerous. As though he’s not turning his back on a reflection of someone who could yet kill him in a breath. He supposes Hannibal might interpret the gesture as one of trust.

“Tell me what *you* see” he asks Hannibal, and the short distance between their eye levels makes Will feel as though he’s pleading, but his voice emerges more steady and forceful than he expected it to.

“The current sum of your conflicts, and each of them dealt with” Hannibal says. It’s studious, the way he considers his words and the subject matter for them. It’s fond, but faintly clinical. “I see a warning of all you’ve proven you can withstand. It’s accomplishment and threat entwined and it is a beauty unparalleled.”

“*Beauty*.”

Will doesn’t mean the word to sound so scathing, but he supposes he should adjust to the word tasting foul on his tongue.

“The beauty is in your resilience and in what you choose to endure” Hannibal tells him.

“So you keep making me endure more?”

“I have provided you with the means to inflict equal or worse on me. You haven’t, not this time.”

Will knows not to challenge the relative perception of harm done; if he’s pinning his chances on being allowed to move on from betrayal, he will simply acquiesce and treat the eccentricity as less dangerous than it is.

“Tell me, Will, because we are both now on the pivot I mentioned. I told you to find me when you were ready for forgiveness. Do you remember?”

Will nods; the indents of the penned letter from Hannibal that tormented and comforted and changed him from his weeks in the hospital; he can feel the swirls and spikes of each letter as clearly as if they'd been carved into the wet tissue of his brain.

*When you are ready for forgiveness, I will be waiting.*

"Are you?" asks Hannibal.

Will's holding him; clutching, almost, as if without his grip on the man he might disperse with the illusion of reconciliation. It's reciprocated, but Hannibal's touch is less cloying and more expectant.

Forgiveness seems too small a vessel to explain everything around his feelings for Hannibal. It's reductive. Hannibal can't be contained by words, or concepts. Or rather, Will's view of Hannibal can't be pinned to something so small, in the same way he could never kill Hannibal with something as small as a bullet. Not now.

"No."

Hannibal's grip tightens, as though he expects Will to reach for any one of the knives or tethers or symbols of retribution. Will remains as he is, whispering his explanation into Hannibal's ear like a seduction, or a taunt.

"It's like you're asking me to review the state of the world and forgive *god*."

The words sound like hissing and Hannibal responds with the thinnest of shudders.

"Anyone would think you're attempting to manipulate my sense of vanity" he replies and Will turns his smile inwards.

"I'm simply *trying*…" Will continues, his breath hot and his neck straining; he's presenting the line of it to the front of Hannibal's teeth as he speaks into his hair. "…To articulate why I'm not ready to reconcile my feelings about…how I believed the world to be, and this new orientation of it. I'm still *learning*."

They're close enough that Will can feel Hannibal stiffening against him.

The ego is such a greedy thing.

Will knows he's saying things that Hannibal needs to hear from him, but he's less clear on how fully he believes them too. It's too easy, seeing Hannibal in superhuman terms. He challenges himself to find contradictions; small things to cling to before he enters depths he's only poked at. None make themselves known.

"So you would paint me as a god, and you only as my subject?" asks Hannibal, leading them closer to the table; close enough that the backs of Will's legs are touching the cool wooden surface. "You cannot be so blind as to your own magnificence."

Will loosens his grasp; enough to push new tension through Hannibal's bones and prompt him to pinion his arms.

“I’m not the same as you” says Will, not protesting Hannibal’s grip.

“Equality is not what I would seek. But you could ascend so much higher. Understand that you have power over me just as I have it over you.”

The tips of Will’s fingers are against the table.

“Are you *ask*ing me to try and kill you again?”

“No, but I’m suggesting that there are other ways in which you could acknowledge your strength, if not your superiority.”

Hannibal relinquishes his grip entirely and steps back to watch the realisation paint Will’s face into lines and an open mouthed, barely spoken *oh*.

This is not where he expected Hannibal to take this. Though, he supposes, his love of infusing sex with psychoanalysis shouldn’t cause this to be too much of a surprise.

Will acts on the prompt, fumbling behind him, fingers scurrying over wood and metal and leather, pausing to wrap around the heavy coil of rope.

His right hand catches the handle of the flooring knife and he brings both round to the front of him. His mind is sparking with possibilities and already his promise to Hannibal, to follow him, is being eclipsed by the idea of a new escape; one which would see the ripper confined. As his mind supplies him with the idea of summoned help and authorities and protocol, the image dulls.

Just *confining* him, to see if it can be done, is enough.

Will cuts a body length of rope from the coil, expecting a retaliation from Hannibal that doesn’t materialise.

“Get on the bed, then” instructs Will, and his voice doesn’t sound like his when he says it.

He’s out of his depth.

“You’ll have to try harder than that,” Hannibal says, and he’s advancing again, arms out and panther fast.

Will kicks Hannibal’s legs out, buckling him in a way that only a dancer could recover from; Hannibal follows the motion of the fall and spins on his knees, kicking back at Will until the two of them are on the floor.

Will leans, snatches at one wrist, tugging the rope around it and catching the meat of Hannibal’s neck in his teeth as he pulls the left one to meet it.

There’s hesitation from Hannibal; as though he’s allowing it. It doesn’t feel like any kind of victory, like this, and yet Will’s seeing his own reflection in the periphery of his vision; all scar ravaged and feral, and he’s smiling; a brash, ugly snarl of a smile and it’s so *strange*, so far from how he sees himself, that he’s faltering around the bowline knot he’s trying to

secure. He misses Hannibal's smile, more serene but no less venomous. When the tug comes, of the rope unfurling and Hannibal's arms unpinning, Will is too slow to catch it.

"It seems you're right about not being ready."

Will's back hits the floor, hard and sharp and there's a disproportionate surge of pain from the impact which draws a shout out of him. Hannibal's smiling, as though he knows of some secret, hidden injury there, his alone to draw suffering from.

Will only fights back as a way of prolonging the performance. The satisfaction of rising to his knees and pinning Hannibal between his thighs, a pant of surprise pulled from the man with the deftness of the move; it's only satisfying because Will knows what has to follow it.

So when Hannibal pulls at the bends of his knees, unbalancing Will enough that he drops, chest forward onto Hannibal's shirt and stoppered only by hands which Hannibal grabs at – Will is slower to snap his wrists free of his dry grip.

Hannibal catches him again and his teeth are at his collarbone, his voice reverberating through the marrow there.

"It may not be wise to allow me this so easily" he says, the last syllable scraping at the skin.

Will curls away from Hannibal's bite, then dives to make his own mark on Hannibal's ear, the thin cartilage held between his teeth.

"Do not mistake me *allowing* this for passivity" he says as he lets the reddened tip of Hannibal's ear from his mouth.

Hannibal's answering smile has teeth.

"Then, Will…"

The pressure on his wrists disappears.

"You should know that for all I want to see you embrace the power you possess…."

The cut black rope coils around Will's neck, stroking at the sensitised skin.

"…That I will find it hard to resist pulling your strength from you in increments, and seeing how you reclaim it."

Will swallows; enough that he feels his neck meet the rope, but nothing so tight as to choke him.

"And I will not do it kindly, nor fairly."

Will tries to find a protest, and then tries to find a reason to protest. His mind sits quiet.

They're moving, Hannibal as guide and Will following, and they're still on the ground, but now the same length of rope is wrapping Will's elbow and forearm to the outside edge of the

bedframe, like a kneeling crucifixion.

“There is a sincerity to you, when you suffer.”

Hannibal is crouching over where Will has his legs folded beneath him, bent knees pointed at the table and the mirror.

Will refuses to look. Not closely.

The free end of the rope catches his other elbow, and Will supposes that Hannibal is being considerate in this; by not aggravating the scabs on his wrists any more than his grip already has.

“Test this for me. Can you move your arms?”

Will is sure that he meant to put up more barriers than this. That he wasn’t going to succumb so quickly, this time. He stretches, tries to pull his forearms as far from the bed frame as he can, and feels the increased tautness around his throat.

“Good.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be running?” asks Will. His legs are numbing already underneath him and he unfolds them, nudging against Hannibal’s ankles.

“We will. I do not expect the authorities to find this place so quickly, but I would hate for them to find you like this. I wouldn’t trust them to know what to do with you.”

Will wonders if the taunt is less of a threat, and more of a test of his reaction to it. He feels himself tightening, the idea of being discovered in a state so powerless heating him from the inside. He wants to be able to keep it separate; this accidental fixation with being bent and moved to another person. It’s not something to lay out for someone so capable of abusing it long past the point of whatever pleasure Will might take from it. And yet, he finds, it’s that – that complete sense of futility – that has him now straining at his skin and needing to be...dealt with. Drained.  His mind still tries to shroud the biology of his wants from him; wrapping them in euphemisms and distractions.

Hannibal leans close, resting his nose against the line in Will’s chest, inhaling as though the split skin has a scent more enticing than any perfume.

“What would you have me do?” he says to the muscle of Will’s chest, his voice vibrating the smallest of nerve endings there.

It feels like a death rattle, but warmer.

“I’d say that’s probably yours to decide, wouldn’t you?” says Will, failing to hide the shake in his voice. His eyes are closed; without Hannibal obscuring his view, his reflection keeps trying to dismantle him. It’s easier to shut it out.

Hannibal splays his arms, reaching for Will’s hands and holding them in his grip.

“This martyr’s pose suits you, it seems.”

“Martyrdom suggests a cause” Will answers, and there’s hot breath on his face and teeth on his lips.

“You’re expecting the worst of me” says Hannibal, mouth moving to Will’s hair and pulling at his arms just enough to tug the black rope tighter. “You should.”

Will swallows and realigns his breathing to accommodate the new pressure.

“When you first came here, you gave every impression of having a death wish.”

Hannibal’s fingers are pressing into dents and furrows in Will’s skin, each of them a different pitch of pain.

“Are you still searching for an exit, Will?”

“No. I feel *alive*” says Will, and means it. Not just in the immediate sense; of nerves in his skin reminding him of the many ways in which he exists. Now, he has the capacity to do more than just survive.

Hannibal kisses at Will’s jaw, lapping across the hair and open skin as though trying to identify honesty from the taste of it. Will catches him, tries to make the gesture reciprocal. The idea of kissing Hannibal seems almost banal at conception, but as the attempt becomes real there’s something heavier than just affection being exchanged. It’s an act of consumption. The barriers between them; flesh and resistance; grow thinner as Hannibal moves his mouth away, tracking down the lines of Will’s chest and to the ridge of his stomach wound.

Will hears a reminder to open his eyes, and he’s met with the view of the back of Hannibal’s head, rising and dipping as he tongues around the torn stitching and undulations of the wound. Hannibal’s arms are reaching under his thighs, lifting his butt from the soft carpet of the floor and angling Will in a way that suggests access.

The more Will thinks about resisting, protesting, the more keenly aware he is of how utterly ineffective it would be. He stiffens, rigid and urgent.

The rope sits taut at his throat and his back strains at the manipulation. It’s enough to tolerate, even with Hannibal’s tongue burrowing between grooves of skin. The image in the mirror is one of worship; Will deified in rope and Hannibal supplicant at the shrine of his suffering.

Will misses the removal of one of the hands supporting his new angle and only feels it when it returns, sliding and damp and pressed softly inside him.

“Watch, Will.”

The view in the mirror contorts as Hannibal ducks back down to tongue at the wound and it feels like it’s splitting fresh, and yet there’s no dampness there beyond that of Hannibal’s mouth. There’s sporadic friction from stubble on Hannibal’s chin against the length of his cock, and nothing tangible. Will expects his reflection to look horrified, revolted, even as

Hannibal presses a finger further into him and prods another at its side. Instead, his own eyes watch him calmly as his open mouth catches breath between the small invasions.

It's like being pulled open. Slowly, reverently; but Will is undoing at the few seams he has left to him.

His reflection is entirely accepting of it. His reflection shows him curling into Hannibal's tongue at his stomach, grimacing and then inviting the sharpness of teeth at the spilt of unmended skin.

The instruction to *enjoy* this, to embrace all that it means, it reverberates through flesh and viscera.

Will strains at the rope on his arms as he grapples for *more*, more contact, more of the hollowed black nightmare burrowing into him and watches his reflection balance excruciation with hunger.

His breath stutters as the makeshift noose tugs tighter at his throat and then Hannibal's mouth is at his, damp and sour, and fingers latch beneath the rope to loosen the choke.

"Don't pull it again" Hannibal tells him, biting at Will's mouth. "I'm not saving you from yourself."

Will tries to bite back in answer, keeping his neck as rigid as the shake in his blood will let him. That the options to fight back with his mouth or try and pull free with his arms will both result in the same tightening of the rope seems appropriate, somehow.

There's another kiss, more consumptive than the last and with more teeth; Hannibal pulls back to savour, his tongue resting on his lips and eyes closed. The reflection shows the belted waistband of Hannibal's trousers bunched at his folded knees, the muscles of his buttocks shifting as he pulls Will up by his hips to meet him.

The angle is wrong; Will's chin is too close to his chest and Hannibal is still on his knees, raising and folding Will's legs so that his calves rests on Hannibal's shirt-covered shoulders. There's no room for  movement, this way. Hannibal pulls Will onto him, the exertion of balance and support more strenuous than the small push as he presses inside; just the damp tip, and so *slow* that Will can't help the high pitch of the *fuck* he breathes into the room.

Hannibal's breath shakes as he pushes further, matching each resistant contraction around him with a small shunt.

It's close to impossible to support himself at this angle; Will is uncomfortably aware that his breathing is solely dependent on Hannibal being able to hold his grip as he continues the small movements inside him. Will's legs stiffen and wrap behind Hannibal's neck; close to the muscle and as much a reciprocation as an act of balance.

Hannibal doesn't speak; just continues the shuttle into, further into, then back, surveying the answering pants and low gasps with a concentrated satisfaction.

Time contracts this way; Will tries to measure it by his own breaths; short and light and frantic; then by the lurching inside him, then by the calmer exhalations of Hannibal's breath and his own thudding heartbeat. It forms a metronomic cacophony; all urgent and straining and stretching; until the rhythms start to converge and Hannibal's movements thin to a tremble and his fingers scrape heavy lines into the back of him.

The words that pour out of Hannibal when he comes are not in a language Will recognises; there's only sweat and a gleam to his eyes that looks exultant.

As Hannibal pulls out, swift and efficient and as though he'd never lost even a moment of control, Will feels his legs being manoeuvred back to the ground, and the fierce discomfort gives way to desperation.

"Until you seek to upset and redress the imbalance between us, I will dictate for you both your endurances and reprieves."

Will doesn't find any words to offer agreement; just hopes that Hannibal will understand the unholy and all-encompassing *need* for a reprieve in this moment. The pain of burning muscles and weeping skin is a background hum against the simple biological reaction to all that's been done to him.

Hannibal stands, pulling his trousers up and turning his back on Will. He scoops each item from the table and places each into a black holdall.

The terms of elopement look uncomfortably clear, this way, and the reflection in the mirror looks no less sinister for having the items removed from it.

"And until you learn to challenge my right to do so, you will accept kindness from me as well as cruelty, and bear the full impact of both. Do you understand?"

Will nods. Hannibal can see the motion in the mirror but chooses to ignore it.

"I understand cruelty in particular right now" Will tells him, watching Hannibal's mouth curl into an approximation of a smile as he turns back to Will.

"You misjudge what is meant by cruelty, in that case."

"Then prove me *wrong*, Hannibal."

Hannibal kneels in front of Will with an elegance unbecoming of the situation, parting Will's legs so that he's framed between them.

"You're terrible at being taken care of."

Will bites his lips to stop himself from arguing about the meaning of the word 'care', and then he bites it harder as Hannibal's warm, wet mouth tongues at the head of his cock.

It withdraws, replaced by fingers and there is no way Will can hold onto himself even with the delicacy of contact.

“I only want you to see that you have as much right to indulgence as you do to the worst of things” he says, and then there’s a hand at his jaw and that warm mouth folding around the tip of him, and Will’s staring up at the mirror; with all the blood and the unwilling satisfaction of his eyes answering him like a becoming. It takes so little work from Hannibal’s tongue, from the fingers on his skin and the touch at the base of his cock; he comes, eyes wide and throat opening against the rope with a shout of something terrified and accepting.

“I’m asking you to allow yourself this” Hannibal tells him with a wet mouth, fingers tracing the dampness of his chin and channelling the trail back to his lips. “You’ll understand how to forgive me then, I think.”

Will nods and breathes out a thin *yes*. There’s a shivering calmness to his state which makes agreement seem inevitable. Organic. It doesn’t feel like his own mind making the decisions anymore; the twines and tendrils of Hannibal’s reasoning wrapped through and round him so thoroughly that the physical tension of the ropes seems insignificant in comparison.

He’ll fight it – he knows, somewhere, that he has to fight – even if he’s being told that to fight it is a wish that belongs to Hannibal, and not to him.

He’ll focus, when he’s less ravaged from aches and stings, and when he’s less dulled from medication, and he’ll illuminate the differences between himself and the man he’s running with; pick out the pinpricks of light from the blackest reflections of each other.

But for now, with damp fingers unknotting the black rope from his arms and pulling him upright, and a blood-warm voice telling him to clean himself before their new life begins, Will agrees.

Exactly as Hannibal knew he would.

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Chapter End Notes

It's finally ended! In a sense, at least.

And I'm sorry this chapter took so long. In the weeks between updates, I did a talk at a slash event where I talked about the logistic difficulties of trying to write this sort of thing, and one of the props I used to illustrate this was a 'character injury map' - based on the acquired wounds throughout this story. Everyone was very kind and slightly horrified, so for everyone here who has read through all the graphic unpleasantness, so much love! Seriously, thank you so much for reading this, and for everyone who left

comments and kudos or talked about it - that kind of encouragement and feedback means a lot more to me than I really know how to articulate. I think I've said similar in other notes, but THANK YOU, EXCELLENT HUMANS!

I fear a follow up may yet emerge, if only so that the contents of the holdall get an airing. Until then I will probably be posting more visual filth on tumblr (Hannibal-specific things now living at mizumono-survivor-support.tumblr.com) - do come and say hi if you want to!

End Notes

Updates will happen every few days. Comments and kudos are better than tramadol...

http://muffichka.tumblr.com/

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!